RANCH ROMANCES

25c
ICD

JUNE
A THRILLING PUBLICATION

APACHE GOLD

They wanted Jess's money and his life

THE PEACEMAKER

The Kid was hiding — from his own gang

MISSING INSIDE FRONT COVER

Learning to Play Music is Now Easy as A B C

A. First you are TOLD in plain English WHAT to do

B. Then a picture SHOWS you HOW

C. Then you PLAY it yourself -- and amaze your FAMILY and FRIENDS!

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—Mrs. Mildred Fink, Cadwell, Ohio

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— Howard Hopkins, East Syracuse, N. Y.

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— Peter H. Kozyra, Manitoba, Canada

U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC,
Studio 1446, Port Washington, N. Y.

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34th Year of Publication

Editor: Jim Hendryx, Jr.

RANCH ROMANCES

VOL. 210, NO. 3
JUNE, 1958

JUNE ISSUE

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

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To People Who Want to Write

but can't get started

Do you have that constant urge to write but fear that a beginner hasn't a chance? Then listen to what a famous editor said on this subject:

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THE Newspaper Institute of America offers a FREE Writing Aptitude Test. Its object is to discover new recruits for the army of men and women who add to their income by fiction and article writing.

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THANKS N. I. A. FOR WRITING ACHIEVEMENT

"I sold a question and answer to the 'Quiz-Em' column in 'This Week' Magazine. I also had a feature published with a by-line in the Lapeer County Press. Thanks to N.I.A. for my writing success." — Mrs. Norma Sullivan, Marlette, Mich.

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Teen-Age Collector

Dear Editor:

As a teen-ager who enjoys your magazine very much, I would like to join the Air Mail column. I collect stamps and picture post cards, and would love to exchange cards with other people. I hope to hear from people of all ages all over the world, and especially from those with my hobbies.

MARY ALICE HAMMOND

434 Shrode
Duarte, California

Young Texan

Dear Editor:

I am nineteen years old, have black hair and gray eyes. I am 5'11" tall, and weigh 150 lbs. I like all sports, but football is my favorite. Western music is another one of my interests. All you girls and boys are invited to write, and I promise I will answer all letters and exchange snapshots.

EUGENE McGLOTHINE

Box 58
Smiley, Texas

Lonesome State

Dear Editor:

I am a 46 year old widow, living with my teen-age daughter and my parents. Am 5'6" tall, weigh 136, and have blonde hair and gray-green eyes. Texas is a large state, I've found, but it can be very lonely in spite of all the people. I promise to answer all letters, so all who can write or print, drop me a line.

LEA SMITH

304 South Houston
Hillstone, Texas

Steady Reader

Dear Editor:

I am a steady reader of RANCH ROMANCES. I live alone, and sometimes get very lonely. I am 44 years old, 5'11" tall, and weigh 150 lbs. Would like very much to hear from ladies between the ages of 37 and 44. I will answer all letters and gladly exchange photos.

WILLIAM A. CHEESMAN

319 High Street W.
Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan
CANADA

Colorado Cowboy

Dear Editor:

I am a very lonely cowboy, living on a ranch in the Colorado mountains. I am 6' 4" tall, weigh 192 lbs. and I'm 21 years old. I'm brown-eyed and brown-haired, and not too bad looking. I would really like to hear from some interesting gals, and will gladly exchange snapshots.

JACK WHEELER

Steamboat Springs
Colorado

Young Nurse

Dear Editor:

Here's a plea from a 19 year old nurse. Am 5' 4" tall, dark brown hair, green eyes, and weigh 115 lbs. I love the outdoors, but horses are my specialty, since I have my own cowpony. Would love to hear from horse-lovers and ranch-dwellers. Will answer all letters.

ELSIE BROWN

Fisher River Ind. Hosp.
Hodgson, Manitoba
CANADA

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 34 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Lonely Widower

Dear Editor:

I would like very much to join your Air Mail column. I am 52 years old, 5' 10" tall, weigh 150 lbs. I have sandy hair and blue eyes. I am a widower. Letters from ladies my own age would make me very happy, but I'd be glad to hear from anyone, and will answer all letters.

JAMES U. MONTGOMERY

1012 Montgomery Road
Weston, West Virginia

Polio Victim

Dear Editor:

I am a brown-haired, gray-eyed girl of 23. I love all sports. When I was six months old I had polio in my right hand and haven't used it since. I would like to hear from handicapped boys and girls, and all others who care to write, between the ages of 20 and 30.

NORMA SLAUGHTER

Route 1
Milton, N. C.

Ozark Boy

Dear Editor:

I am 17½ years old, and have dark hair and blue eyes. I love to collect picture postcards, as well as pictures. I would like to write to anyone who will write to me, but particularly girls. Will send pictures to all who answer me. I am from the beautiful Ozarks.

TOM LOFTIS

2570 - 64th Ave.
Oakland, California

THOUGHTS HAVE WINGS

You Can Influence Others With Your Thinking!

TRY IT SOME TIME. Concentrate intently upon another person seated in a room with you, without his noticing it. Observe him gradually become restless and finally turn and look in your direction. Simple—yet it is a *positive demonstration* that thought generates a mental energy which can be projected from your mind to the consciousness of another. Do you realize how much of your success and happiness in life depend upon your influencing others? Is it not important to you to have others understand your point of view—to be receptive to your proposals?

Demonstrable Facts

How many times have you wished there were some way you could impress another favorably—*get across to him or her your ideas*? That thoughts can be transmitted, received, and understood by others is now scientifically demonstrable. The tales of miraculous accomplishments of mind by the ancients are now known to be fact—not fable. The method whereby these things can be *intentionally*, not accidentally, accomplished has been a secret long cherished by the Rosicrucians—one of the schools of ancient wisdom existing throughout the world. To thousands everywhere, for centuries, the Rosicrucians have privately taught this nearly-lost art of the practical use of mind power.

This *Free* Book Points Out the Way

The Rosicrucians (not a religious organization) invite you to explore the powers of your mind. Their sensible, simple suggestions have caused intelligent men and women to soar to new heights of accomplishment. *They will show* you how to use your natural forces and talents to do things you now think are beyond your ability. *Use the coupon below* and send for a copy of the fascinating sealed *free* book, "The Mastery of Life," which explains how you may receive this unique wisdom and benefit by its application to your daily affairs.

The ROSICRUCIANS
(AMORC)

Scribe S.W.G. The Rosicrucians, AMORC,
Rosicrucian Park, San Jose, California.

Kindly send me a free copy of the book, "The Mastery of Life." I am interested in learning how I may receive instructions about the full use of my natural powers.

Name.....

Address.....State.....

TRAIL DUST

PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!

DROPPING something at the scene of a safe-cracking job proved the undoing of a District Heights, Md., yegg. What he left behind was a fingertip, which flew off in the explosion of the safe. Police got a print off the fingertip, it matched up with one on file and the safe-cracker went to jail for five years.

CHEESE CAN CATCH more than mice. When a Ft. Madison, Ia. school lunchroom was broken into, police were intrigued by a bite in a chunk of cheese that the thief had taken. Marks indicated several missing teeth and a scholar with such a dental pattern was found. He not only admitted this break-in but solved a wave of recent burglaries by implicating himself and three other youths.

A HELPFUL San Gabriel, Calif., boss invented a typewriter with a built-in eraser key for his secretary. There was one catch, the key contained a special chemical and when the letters were ready for mailing, the chemical had dissolved the paper also.

MEMBERS at an annual dinner at Casper, Wyo., were slightly shaken when they found cards reading "Eat More Beef" under their plates. The dinner was for the Wyoming Wool Growers Assn.!

A WARD judge in Mt. Vernon, Ill., at a city election threw out a vote for false address despite an absentee voter's affidavit giving a certain address. The address happened to be that of the judge's home.

WHILE visiting police headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah, to find out what his taxes were buying, a man found his car had been stolen while he was on his tour.

A FATHER in Birmingham, Mich., who usually reimburses his son for chores, found a note one morning, reading: "Dear Dad, Please leave some money in case I decide to do some work."

MAKING good their escape, three butter-fingered robbers dropped $15 and a cigarette lighter in Stockton, Calif. All they had left was the empty wallet of the cab driver they robbed.

AFTER paying $95 damage for backing into a small foreign car with her conventional-sized one, a woman in Long Beach, Calif., explained she heard a "crunching" noise but thought she had run over a cardboard box.

A SIGN hanging in front of a Cedarville, Wisc., restaurant boasts, "Duncan Hines never ate here, probably couldn't find a seat."

IN MICHIGAN, a lady is recovering from pistol wounds—received when the pistol she carried in her brassiere accidentally discharged.

TAKING precaution after a run of robberies, a Casper, Wyo., service station owner called police and reported a suspicious looking man parked across from his place. Soon a squad car full of armed officers arrived and found the suspicious man to be a Mineral, Ill., police judge waiting to use a phone booth nearby.

Editors Agree: Opportunities Greater Now Than Ever

The public press reports that magazine editors are desperate for good short stories. For instance, *Good Housekeeping* needed a backlog of at least 25. *Cosmopolitan* stated enough good stories were not being submitted. All editors said every manuscript submitted is read, whether from an agent or not. *L.A. Times* stated good script writers for TV are in greater demand than ever. Palmer Institute's unique training covers all these fields of creative writing.

Wanted: New Writers
For Magazines, TV, Special Journals

Read What Palmer Graduates Say:

New Writer Succeeds

"Before taking the Palmer course I knew nothing about writing. All I possessed was the *urge* and a battered old typewriter. Now, after studying with Palmer, I have sold short stories to *The Family Herald, Weekly Star,* and others. One brought me a check for $125." — Edith P. Worthman, Albany, Ga.

My First 2 Stories Brought Me $255

"Before completing the Palmer course I sold two stories: one for $110, the other for $145," writes Adam B. Artez, Tarentum, Pa. "When the going got rough I turned to the Palmer Lessons. The answer was there. Luck? Plenty of it. But with the continued help I am receiving from the Palmer staff I know I'll be lucky again."

$1400 From Outdoor Life

"Sold an article on hunting to *Outdoor Life* for $400 — that makes $1400 from them, plus two stories to *The Trapper,* and several to other men's magazines. The time put in on your course was the most valuable I ever spent." — Ray Beck, Knox, Pa.

Free Offer Shows How to Learn at Home for Extra or Full-Time Income

Now it's easier than you may imagine to learn *at home* how to use professional techniques in putting your ideas into salable form. For instance: Edmee B. Nash of Glendale, Mo., sold her first article *before completing her course* for $150. . . . The first story by H. F. Wenderoth of Atlantic City sold for $240. . . . Graham Doar's story in *The Post* was also sold to CBS Radio and NBC-TV

Furthermore, editors agree: Opportunities for new writers are greater than ever, and you don't have to have a big name or be a genius to make good money writing.

Learn from Successful Writers

Palmer Institute's unique method of training makes it easier to learn—for NOT just *one* field of writing, but for *all*: Fiction and Articles for magazines, TV, and specialized publications. It is an approved school, endorsed by famous authors and hundreds of successful graduates. You receive *individual* coaching by professional writers who give helpful, detailed instruction showing how to write salable material.

FREE Offer Shows How

So you can see for yourself how you can cash in on the opportunities for new writers, we will send you *free* a typical lesson and our inspiring 40-page book, showing how we help new writers get started and established writers get into big pay field.

Frankly, we make this offer because we are confident that when you see how interesting and helpful our training is, you will want to get started earning extra money or enjoying a full-time writing career. No obligation; no salesman will call. Send before you forget.

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Hollywood 28, California

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ROUNDUP
of Western Movies, Music and TV

EVERYONE is struck with the talented and good-to-look-at Erin O'Brien, who plays the lady lead on ABC-TV's *Maverick* Sunday nights . . . United Artists plans to shoot *Ten Days to Tulara* in Mexico. This will be an outdoor action film starring Sterling Hayden . . . Virginia Mayo, who co-starred with Clint Walker in *Fort Dobbs,* will have another starring role with Karen Steele and Randy Scott in *Westbound.* Warners will produce this story of a stagecoach line running through the pioneer West. You remember Miss Steele and Mr. Scott in *Decision at Sundown,* also a Warners release . . . Sonny James's newest Cap platter, *First Date, First Kiss, First Love,* is following the high sales records set by his *Young Love* (over the two million mark) . . . Eddie Arnold, one of our favorite country musicians, stars in CBS Radio's morning recording program five days a week, and is drawing plaudits . . . Cornel Wilde has his eye on a Western called *The Trail Blazer,* about the Oregon trail, which he'd like to do at Paramount . . . *Cole Younger, Gunfighter,* in Cinema-Scope and Color by DeLuxe, has been completed on the Allied Artists' lot and should be in your neighborhood soon.

Shirley MacLaine will co-star with Glenn Ford and Leslie Nielsen in MGM's Western, *Too Big For Texas* . . . (Is *any*thing too big for Texas?) . . . One of the world's largest coffee concerns, Companhia Jardim, is sponsor of the Roy Rogers television show in Brazil.

Filming of the South American version show takes place in Brazil, and will be welcome on that country's 500,000 (at last count) television sets . . . Good-looking, top-ranking country songster Hank Thompson is breaking records with recordings for Capitol of *I Was the First One* and *Rockin' In The Congo* . . . Jeff Alexander is doing the musical score for MGM's *Saddle the Wind* . . . *No Place To Die,* a Sterling Hayden starrer at Allied Artists, has had its title changed to *Gun Battle at Monterey* . . . Most of the filming of *The Proud Rebel,* staring Alan Ladd and Olivia de Havilland, will be done at Cedar City, Utah . . .

The wonderful radio show, The Philip Morris Country Music Show, has gone nationwide over the CBS network. Carl Smith and Goldie Hill star in this one, along with all-star country-music entertainers . . . Alan Ladd's son David has a very good part in his first movie, *The Proud Rebel,* which stars his famous father and Olivia de Havilland. King, the collie which appears in it, is so valuable to this Western drama that he's been insured for $100,000 with Lloyd's of London . . . 20th Century-Fox plans production in 1958 of the third movie version of *Blood and Sand.* Sophia Loren will co-star with an as yet unselected American actor in this drama of the bull ring . . . When Maxine Cooper was interviewed for an outdoor-gal role in CBS-TV's *Mr. Adams and Eve,* casting director Marge McKay commented, "You look right for the part—but can you get on a horse?" Maxine was forced to admit that she was grand championship winner for horsemanship two years in a row at the International Livestock Show in Chicago . . . Pat Boone said the other day that the biggest TV deal in his life—and the most lucrative—was when Bob Hope agreed to appear on his show if Pat would appear on Bob's—with no exchange of cash . . . Frank Lovejoy, one of our favorite actors, reported to Allied Artists for *Cole Younger, Gunfighter* . . .

Columbia's *Cowboy* (a scene from which appears at the beginning of this column) introduces a new kind of cowpoke to the screen; a tenderfoot who's outwitted, outfought and outloved. Jack Lemmon plays the part of Harris, a Chicago bellboy with dreams of becoming a big cattleman. He joins the trail drive of tough, rich, overbearing Reece (Glenn Ford), and on the drive to Mexico learns that a cowboy's life isn't romantic, but backbreakingly hard, that cattle are more important than men. He turns as hard and bitter as Reece himself in order to conquer his innate softness, but when in the end he proves his real manhood he turns out to be everybody's kind of guy. Anna Kashfi, (Marlon Brando's bride) plays a Mexican beauty; Brian Donlevy portrays a gun-fighter who joins the drive as a cowhand; Victor Manuel Mendoza, the tall, suave "Clark Gable of Mexico" is featured as a top cowhand and Robert "Buzz" Henry, former rodeo champ and bronc rider, has another important role. This is a different Western: no villain, no crooked sheriff, no battle over water rights; there's little gunplay and few Indians but when they're at bat, hating the whites, they make things pretty hot. You can't miss this one . . .

John Merrick reported to 20th Century-Fox for *Ambush at Cimarron Pass* as soon as he'd finished his *Wells Fargo* telefilm . . . The folks at Epic Records are ecstatic over Sal Mineo's successful disking: *Start Movin',* backed by *Love Affair,* is already a smash hit . . . And speaking of top-selling vocalists, Elvis Presley's Vic records have gone way over the ten-million mark. His *All Shook Up* soared over four million in its first three months! . . . George Montgomery snagged the starring role in *Toughest Gun in Tombstone,* at United Artists . . . RKO Teleradio has a title change for their television series *El Coyote Rides Again.* The new moniker is *Bat Masterson—The Legend, The Man,* and Wild Bill Elliott will play the lead . . .

Paul Brinegar has been signed to appear with Joel McCrea, Gloria Talbott, Don Haggerty and Phyllis Coates in *Cattle Empire,* being produced by Robert Stabler and directed by Charles Marquis Warren for 20th Century-Fox. . . Hugh O'Brian will star in *Enough Rope,* a new Fox Western . . . Some solid singing is to be heard on M-G-M- disking of Bud Deckelman's *As Long as I Can Dream,* as tempting a ballad as we ever heard, backed by a bright novelty called *I Done Fell Too Far* . . . And Rita Fay, another M-G-M

star, has turned out two songs of lasting quality in *We've Got Some Dreaming To Do* and *You're In My Heart* . . .

Will Rogers, Jr., will star in Universal's *Death Rides This Trail* as a frontier judge in the Western. This is his fourth film, and in each succeeding one he proves himself worthy of his name . . . Tall, handsome Anthony Perkins is the son of the late stage and screen actor, Osgood Perkins, and veteran observers of the Hollywood scene cannot recall any other star, proven or unproven, in which the industry placed so high a stake. His first picture, with Jean Simmons, was *The Actress,* then *Friendly Persuasion,* which won him the Academy Award as the best supporting actor. One of his latest films is Paramount's *The Lonely Man,* in which he co-starred with Jack Palance and Elaine Aiken, in this Western drama. Tony is a native New Yorker, and on April 14th had some 28 candles on his birthday cake. In music he's a pop fan, and he can play the piano and sing; his first Epic Record was *Friendly Persuasion* and *A Little Love Can Go A Long, Long Way;* his latest, *A Fool In Love,* has hit the Hit Parade. Tony's reading matter ranges from Dickens to Thomas Wolfe and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Single, he divides his time between New York and Hollywood, maintaining apartments in both towns . . . Western features starring Roy Rogers and Gene Autry, in seventh and fourth runs, respectively, are outdistancing many of Hollywood's biggest film features in their first runs, according to an examination of ARB figures by the MCA research department . . . Seems like Westerns are here to *stay* . . . The comic strip *Johnny Reb and Billy Yank* will be promoted by a tune of that title written by veteran tunesmith Charles Tobias. The strip will also carry the lyrics of the song spotted over a period of several weeks. Previous efforts to tie in cartoon characters with songs include such successful ditties as *Barney Google* and *Little Orphan Annie,* an album of *Pogo,* and, of course, the Broadway show, *Li'l Abner.*

Tennessee Ernie Ford contends that a city slicker is just a country boy who gets his milk out of a bottle instead of a cow. Tennessee's corn-fed humor and countrified vocal stylings bear out his immense popularity; his latest Capitol album is *Tennessee Ernie Ford: Spirituals* and a new Cap single, a sure hit, is *Lonely Man,* from the Paramount picture of the same name . . . NBC-TV's *Wagon Train* with Ward Bond in the starring role continues to snag fans from other shows. Robert Horton co-stars in this story of people who took part in the most dangerous migration in our country's history. The area in which they fought and suffered extended from Missouri to the Pacific Ocean; only in the sense that the series adheres to facts and locale is it a Western, but any Western fan will enjoy it. Ward's role as wagon master Seth Adams portrays him as an iron-willed ex-major of the Union Army whose job is to control the varied groups as mayor, chief of police, counselor and chaplain conbined. Thousands of persons, young and old, from all walks of life, took part in the giant migration in quest of new futures. Through their courage and determination they developed a phase of the American story that has never fully been told. To be filled in on the facts, catch *Wagon Train* . . .

Anthony Perkins shows versatility

Big Bill Williams, star of *The Adventures*

of Kit Carson, has both the physique and the natural inclination for his role as one of American's most famous heroes. He rides well, shoots fast, lassoes beautifully and can throw his six-foot-one-inch 190-pound frame around like a polecat. Though he looks like a man who has spent his lifetime out in the wide open spaces of Arizona, Bill was born in Brooklyn, New York. In his teens he studied engineering at Brooklyn Tech High School, and at Pratt Institute. Always an athlete, Bill excelled in swimming, football, baseball, hockey and other gymnastic pursuits. Possessing a versatility envied by many actors, Bill sang baritone for two seasons with the St. Louis Municipal Opera Company, and in England was an adagio dancer with a vaudeville troupe. The troupe played at the London Palladium, gave a command performance for the royal family, and caught the last boat to sail from England before war broke out in 1939.

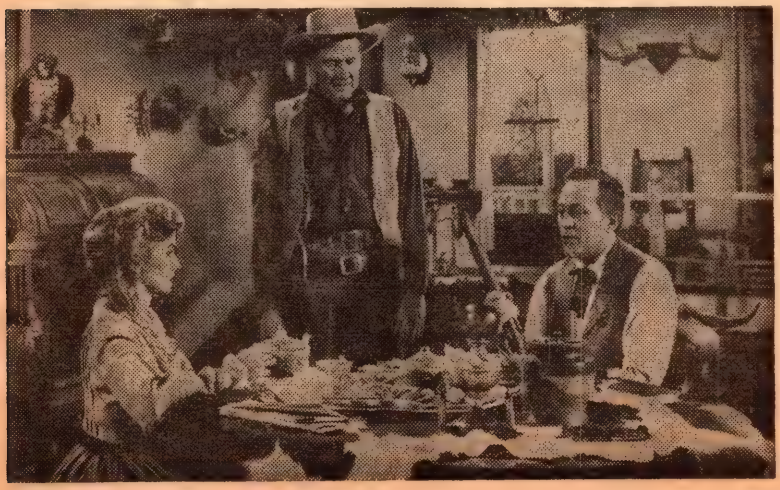
Bill is a family man and lives on a Van Nuys, Californian ranch with his wife and three children. For his role as Kit Carson he keeps in top physical condition by swimming regularly in his backyard swimming pool and has a daily go at weight-lifting. He's presently teaching his two oldest children, Willa Barbara Johanna, nicknamed Jody, and William Theodore, called Billy, to swim. His wife, Barbara, says she can "float very well." Bill says his TV role has made his own nickname "Kit" more often than "Bill."

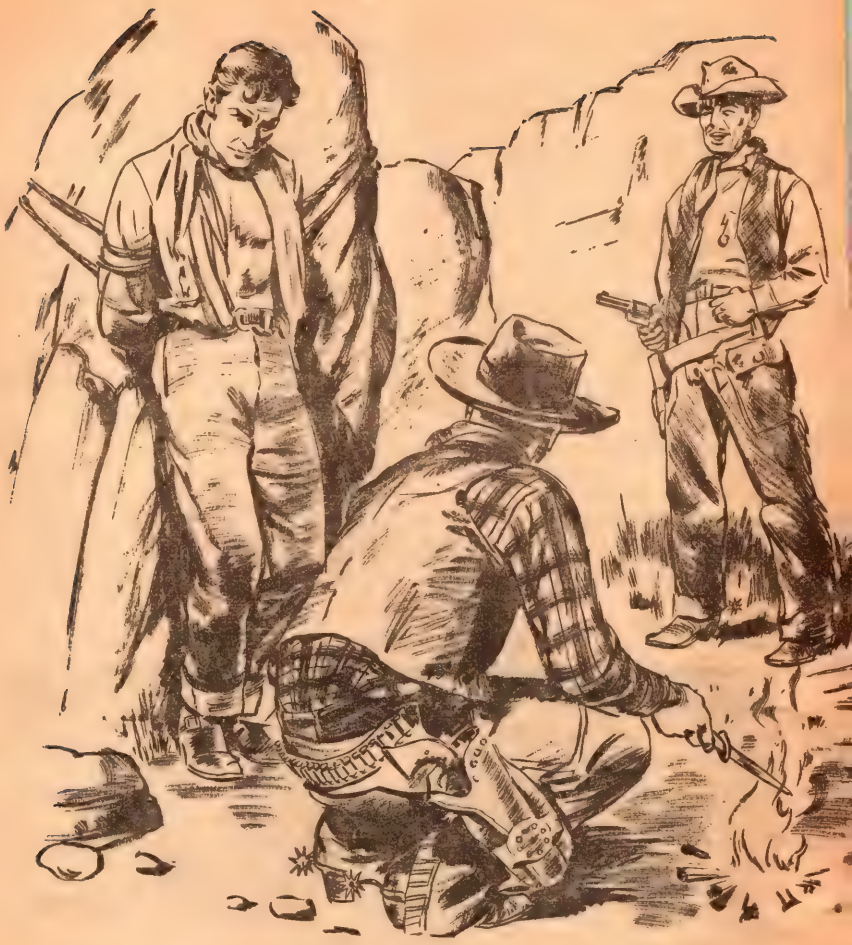
Earl Holliman, one of Hollywood's fastest rising personalities, has been assigned a co-starring role with Kirk Douglas and Anthony Quinn in Hal Wallis' Western epic, *The Last Trail From Harper's Junction* . . . Don't miss Capitol's Jean Shepard warbling the ballad, *You're Just the Kind of Guy* . . . Dickson Hall and The Wayfarers have recorded *Cowboy* on Columbia, the song's taken from the picture *The Cowboy* . . .

M-G-M has signed Louis L'Amour to write the script for a possible TV series. The studio is deciding between two titles, *Desert Rider* or *The Fastest Gun Alive.* If the latter title seems familiar to you, it was a picture released by the company a year ago with Glenn Ford and Broderick Crawford co-starred . . .

—Nancy Granger

A tense moment in "Cattle Empire" starring Joel McCrea





APACHE

A Novelette

Jess Westfall had to fight his way back to where he had buried a fortune In gold—and Indians were not the worst of the killers who stalked him

JESS WESTFALL lay in the cleft of the rock reef watching the Apache. From the Indian's actions, he had not yet gotten wind of Jess' presence, and if he continued on his present rather aimless course, it would be another half-hour before he cut Jess' sign.

It worried Jess that the Apache was apparently alone. Such a thing was not impossible, but it was highly unlikely. Usually, where you saw one, you could expect others—at least one or two more.

Jess glanced at the sun. It was still three hours before dark. A half hour for the Apache to cut his sign, another hour for him to bring in his companions and close in on Jess. Possibly a little more. Two hours.

That still left an hour of light for them to clean Jess Westfall's plow. Such an idea didn't

GOLD

By

W. J. REYNOLDS

appeal to Jess. He still had a tender, puckered scar on his left breast to remind him of Apaches.

A startling thought sent tension through Jess Westfall, and brought his head around like a wary wolf. That one could be wandering along there, holding Jess' attention, while the others closed in, silent, deadly.

Jess saw no movement, heard no sound, but this brought him no comfort. He knew Apaches. When you saw or heard them—unless they wanted it that way—you were fighting for your life. Or, you were dead.

Still watching all around, he sent frequent glances at the Apache below, evaluating the possibilities. If his luck was good, that boy yonder would go for help, that would give him all night and part of tomorrow to make far-apart tracks. Or else the Indian could get curious and stalk Jess, until he figured his destination, or what he was up to. But these were just possibilities. With an Indian, you could never tell.

Then Jess put all his attention on the Apache below and another appeared as suddenly as though he had popped out of a rock. He gesticulated at the other, shot a swift arm toward Jess.

Jess' jaw set. So, the Apaches did know he was here. There were more, Jess felt sure, and they were closing in. But something had upset them. His grip on the Henry rifle was slick with sweat. He was in a bad situation, how bad depended on the number of Apaches.

He'd never get that gold in Scorpion Canyon this way. But he would very likely get a war ax buried in his skull—or a Spencer bullet like the last time.

Then Jess Westfall saw what had excited the Apaches, and upset their stalking of him. A feather of dust wafted away from a saddle in the down fingering ridge, four hundred yards away from Jess, and about the same distance from the Indians. Three horsemen, white men, sat their horses looking at the Indians. Then they looked toward Jess. Instantly, Jess stood up, waving his hat.

They showed no sign of having seen him, but dismounted and checked cinches. One man went back to check a mule's packsaddle —a thin, depleted pack. Then they hunkered in the shade of an overhang.

Jess stared, then dropped back to cover. The two Apaches below had disappeared. Anger began to work in Jess when he realized the men had no intention of helping him. Why? There could be lots of reasons, but none of them worth a damn to Jess Westfall. It boiled down simply to the fact that they were white men and were making no move to assist him.

Jess considered making a run for his horses three hundred yards away in a brushy draw, but he vetoed the thought instantly. There were other Apaches and they were very likely within rifle shot. Their not shooting when he stood up was due, probably, to their surprise at the appearance of those other men. Apaches didn't like surprises, but that wouldn't stop them if he showed himself again. Not when the Apaches knew those men obviously didn't intend to interfere.

The harsh cry of a desert hawk warned Jess. As he turned, the Apache was almost on him, war ax swinging at his head. Jess didn't have time to fire, but jerked the rifle up to take the savage blow.

The ax hit the Henry's breech. Jess didn't have time to think, he dropped the Henry, stroked up his six-shooter and fired into the Apache's belly. An arrow slit his shirt under the arm, he turned and fired into the other Apache. Jess fired a second time before the Indian had time to fall.

A bullet cried by Jess, and a puff of smoke a hundred yards away told Jess where the shot had come from. Range shot, thought Jess. He was sure there were only four of them. Two left, and they weren't likely to press the attack now.

Jess shot a look at the ridge. The three men mounted up, turned, and were riding out of sight. Jess grabbed the Henry, slanted it at them and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

He looked at the rifle. A bright gash in the badly dented breech showed him why it wouldn't fire. If he had taken a chance on that second Apache with it. . . .

HE LOOKED again at the empty ridge, his gray eyes filled with rage. If he ever set eyes on that bunch he'd have a word or two to say to them.

As he calmed a little, he began to calmly recall everything he could about them. A nagging familiarity about the men bothered him, but he couldn't place them in his mind. A bay horse, a sorrel, a claybank. A lean man in what might be a frock-type coat. A black bearded man; a straight, quick-moving man, but chunky. Not much to go on once they were among other men and horses.

Jess began moving away to new cover. Those Apaches out there wouldn't leave the dead ones, and they couldn't come after them with Jess Westfall there. A bullet plowed up the dirt in front of him, then another shot skinned his back. Jess was up then, running hard, and rage filled shouts were all that hindered him as he plunged up a slight rise to a bowl-like depression.

This new cache was better. It gave him all around cover, and a clear field of fire. There was only one catch. If the two men out there knew his rifle was out of order they'd try to get him. He glanced at the sun and was surprised to see that no more than half an hour of light was left. He had a chance now.

The Apaches wouldn't try for his horses either. The new move had put him within easy rifle range of them. But he'd have to get to them by dark. He hunkered on his knees, reloaded the six-shooter and settled down to wait. He looked at the ridge and again the anger glinted in his eyes. Funny acting bunch, it was almost as if they'd seen what they wanted and were satisfied.

Suddenly, Jess stiffened, remembering that vague familiarity, and placing it. Those three, or two of them, he'd seen before. The one in the frock coat he'd met on the stage from Frisco. The man had tried to pump him about that fight in Scorpion Canyon, and the gold. The bearded one had tried the same thing in Apo where he had bought his horses and outfit. The chunky one he could not recall, but there had been a fancy-dressed young man with snaky eyes in Frisco.

But if it had been the bunch that had tried to get a line on the gold, then why hadn't they pulled the Apaches off him and earned his gratitude? Hell, that was it! They knew he'd recognize them and be wary. But he would be no use to them dead either.

A possibility occurred to him. They hadn't known about the two Apaches already near Jess, but they'd seen him take care of them and knew the others wouldn't press him. Two Apaches would not try to take a salty cuss that had killed a pair of them already.

Those dirty sons were probably waiting, ready to tail Jess to the gold. Well, he'd have something to say about that—with lead. Too many men had died over that gold already. Jess had lost a real friend in Scorpion Canyon, Sam Stewart, and Sam had a daughter back east who could use his part of the treasure. Jess Westfall had promised Sam that she would get it if he survived and Sam didn't.

Of the six men in the prospecting party, all were dead except Jess. There had been quite a battle in Scorpion Canyon, with Apaches apparently everywhere and mad as hornets. Jess and Sam Stewart had stuck together, hidden their gold together. The others had sneaked away during lulls to hide their own gold in secret places. Those separate caches were now known only to dead men.

With only four left of the six, they had made a try to break out and had made a run for it. They had died separately along the canyon, and Jess was, he heard later, collapsed across Sam Stewart's body, dry firing his empty Henry, when the army arrived. Jess had had a hole in his chest, a bullet-nicked lung. He woke up in a hospital in San Francisco.

Jess Westfall strained his eyes and ears in the growing dusk. There was no sign or movement. In another minute he'd have to make his break and get to his horses before the Apaches did. He gripped the damaged Henry in his left hand, his six-shooter in his right and went out of the depression. He went toward his horses at a hard run.

Nothing happened.

Jess didn't plunge into the brushy wash, but went into a slight depression, a small ditch. He listened as well as he could over his harsh breathing and pounding heart. Still no sound. No Apache had gotten the bay or it would have created an uproar. The man who had sold the horse to Jess said the bay hated the smell of an Indian and he'd picked it for that reason.

When his breathing had quieted, he got up and slid into the wash, his cocked pistol extended before him. The bay was still tied to a bush, and looked at him reproachfully after having been tied short for four hours. The pack horse was gone however. He wondered if the man had lied to him, and the Indians had gotten the pack. No, he'd have heard some movement and commotion, and they'd have taken both horses.

Jess walked up, squatted with face close to the ground and could barely make out the spike heeled boot prints. He felt gently to verify this. Somebody, a white man, had stolen his pack horse. Then why not the other?

He remembered the flat pack on the mule of the men in the ridge saddle. Their supplies were obviously gone, and while they waited up there a fourth man had sneaked down here and gotten his pack horse!

Jess Westfall cursed them all impartially and savagely. Apaches weren't enough, he had to put up with thieves too. Thieves and low lifes who would sit by and watch a man murdered and skinned out by Indians while they stole his supplies.

The only thing he could do now was to go to the nearest town for more supplies and a pack horse. He cursed again. The story of the Scorpion Canyon massacre was general gossip, Jess Westfall was known by a lot of people, and just a hint as to who he was, and he'd have a hundred gold crazy idiots on his tail. But he had no choice.

HE UNTIED and mounted the bay, booting the useless Henry, and rode slowly up the wash to a side draw that let him out. He kicked the bay into a run for a half mile, then pulled it down to a lope. That'd take the standing kinks out of the animal and put some distance behind him.

Another mile and the bay started to limp on the off fore foot. Jess dismounted, lifted the hoof and felt for a rock. He didn't find a rock, but he found something else.

All the nails had been pulled but one on either side, and the shoe was barely hanging. The man who had stolen his pack horse had pulled six of the nails. They'd wanted his horse lame.

"Why didn't they just help the damn Apaches kill me?" Jess said aloud.

Jess stood beside the bay, thinking. Sago Springs was the nearest point where he could get supplies, and that was almost east from here, over twenty miles, nearer twenty-five. The bay, used to shoes, would never make it through rocky terrain, and he didn't know the country well enough to avoid all the rock, even if it were possible. His hand went to the Henry's boot. Cowhide.

He took the Henry out, hung it from the horn by a thong, and started fashioning a boot for the bay. Maybe there would be enough leather to last the distance. It would save damage to the hoof and he could at least be on his way.

Sago Springs had once been a busy little town on the stage and freight route, but the opening of mines to the north together with better and easier traveling for the freight and stages, had left it isolated in the semi-desert. Of the thirty odd buildings in the town, not a third were occupied. What was left were sustained mostly by night riders and a few ranches to the east.

The men who stayed there and passed through appreciated the fact that the only law representation was by a self-appointed Justice of the Peace and town marshal, who bestirred himself from his dingy little adobe to hold court with a cocked shotgun and collect a fine to pay his bar bill. Usually, no one minded this as it gave the color of law to Sago Springs without hindering anybody.

Jess Westfall stopped a mile out of Sago Springs and slept the remaining hour of night and until the sun was an hour high. Then he mounted the bay and entered town.

Spotting the blacksmith shop near the livery corral, he rode there and dismounted. The smith, in a dirty red undershirt, was sucking noisly at a cup of coffee in his living quarters behind the smithy.

"My horse needs a shoe job," Jess said.

"I can see," the man said crankily. "You probably ruined that hoof."

"I rode him easy, it's just tender. A good smith can do the job."

"Are you saying I ain't a good smith?" He stood up, glowering, a big man with hairy arms and chest, a belligerent light in his eyes.

Jess rested his gun on the boulder and fired twice

Jess grinned. "Nope. I brought him here, didn't I?"

"All right. You want him put in the livery afterwards? Hymie is a sourpuss but he likes horses, he'll take care of him."

"That'll do fine," Jess said. Suddenly, he stiffened, looking at his pack horse running with the other horses in the corral. "When did that mustang with a pack show up?"

The man shot him a sly glance. "Sometime last night. Hymie put him in the corral about daylight. The pack's in the barn. Is it your's?"

"That's right."

"Broke loose, huh? Nothing meaner than a broken loose horse."

"He didn't break loose. Yesterday three men sat on a ridge and watched the Apaches try to take my scalp. The fourth one sneaked down and stole my pack horse. The man that stole it likes spike heels, likely a fancy dan. The others were a black bearded man, a lean man in a frock coat, and a chunky fellow who moves quick. The sneak that stole my pack horse pulled that shoe."

"They left you stranded to come in for supplies, eh? Reckon you're Jess Westfall. My name's Smitty. The same men were somewhat upset over losing you, and they figured you'd outfit here. They had to have supplies and wanted you here for an even start."

"There *were* four of them," Jess said gently, knowing he'd guessed right.

"Bronco Apaches on the loose, too. Not one or two wanted to stay and trail while others came for supplies. See how it is? They wanted to live to enjoy that gold money. A dirty trick all around, but likely they figured you had the Apaches in hand."

"Maybe. Also maybe, they didn't want to arouse my suspicion since they'd been inquiring about that gold. Instead of making a friend rescuing me from the Indians, it likely would have made me like a wolf."

"Likely. You knew them?" Smitty asked.

Jess nodded. "I met them all between here and Frisco. Spike heels is a fancy kid."

The smith nodded. "Blackbeard is Bill Dort. The lean one in the frock coat is Chan Beldon, the brains. The chunky one is Bat Fite, and spike heels is Kid Lenny."

"Much obliged, Smitty. When do you reckon that bay can travel?"

The smith inspected the hoof. "Today. It would be better to give him a day or two, but it's not necessary."

"Reckon I'll clean up and get some breakfast."

"I'll put him in the corral when I'm done. There's a real pretty girl at the café. Her name's Mae Stewart. She came out here awhile back, after she heard her father died in Scorpion Canyon."

Jess turned to look at the smith, but the big man was already sorting his tools to work on the hoof. Jess turned back and walked toward the livery corrals.

HE SOUGHT out Hymie who turned out to be a scowling pegleg man. He admitted having a pack horse and pack. He listened to Jess' description of the pack contents, checked it, then said, "That'll be a dollar." Jess gave him the dollar. "It'll be another dollar if you leave it here today." Jess gave him another dollar.

"Smitty's got a bay that will be here shortly."

"That'll be a dollar," Hymie growled. Jess gave him another dollar.

He grinned at Hymie who stumped away to his chores. Jess dug soap and razor out of his pack, washed up at the trough and shaved. Then he took the broken Henry to a little adobe that said, GUN SHOP. It needed a new breech, and Jess finally made a dicker with the Mexican for another second hand Henry, paying him twenty dollars to boot. The Mexican, after more haggling, threw in an old saddle boot for another two dollars. Jess took the rifle and boot back to his pack then went to the café.

The café was of adobe with a counter down one side, and three tables filling the opposite side. About half of the stools and chairs were occupied, men lingering on over remenants of breakfast and coffee. Jess was ignored but for furtive glances that tended to verify in his mind his own suspicions formed last night about his being recognized.

They all knew about him, and what had happened to him, just as the smith had known. Jess Westfall had been pulled into town for supplies and a shoe job on his mount, allowing the men who wanted his gold to restock, get fresh horses to replace the ones ridden down hunting him.

Jess took a stool and ordered breakfast. The smith hadn't lied about Mae Stewart being pretty, and almost at once he knew this girl must be Sam's daughter. She didn't weigh more than a hundred-ten, and was light and quick moving. Her hair was black, and her eyes were clear, direct brown. The same eyes that Sam Stewart had had. Jess could see Sam in her wide mouth too, the humor in the corners, a smiling woman as Sam had been a smiling man. But now the smiles were beaten out of the girl.

She took his order without comment and moved quickly away, giving him no chance to speak. She brought him a tough steak and coffee, and again left quickly leaving him to eat in silence.

As she filled his coffee cup a second time she said, "I heard you had a brush with the Apaches."

He looked at her mildly. "That so? Who told you?"

"Why, Kid—"

"Mae! More coffee back here." The order was called sharply from the rear table.

It was called, Jess noted, by a fancy dan in spike heels, a fancy gun-rig and striped pants. The same young man who had tried to pump him in Frisco. She shot him a resentful glance but went back to fill his cup. He spoke low and quick to her.

When she came back, Jess said, "You were saying, ma'am?"

"My mistake, mister. I saw you ride in on a beaten horse, and carry a broken rifle to the gun shop. Usually a fight means Apaches." She was a little pale, but excitement beat deep in her unfriendly eyes.

"You may be right, ma'am." Jess paid for his meal and left, not understanding this hostility in his friends daughter.

He walked with solid striking heels off the

café porch, toward the biggest saloon, but at the corner of the café, he stopped, and leaned against the corner at the side.

Several men straggled out of the café, talking about him—when he'd leave, how much gold was in Scorpion Canyon. Kid Lenny came out, shouldered through the men to a big black and white pinto. He had a foot in the stirrup when Jess walked up, grabbed his collar, hauled him back and hit him a smashing blow in the face.

Lenny's yell was cut abruptly off, the blow sending him crashing into the hitch rail. Jess hit him again in the face, a solid swing that heeled Lenny over the rail to fall limply on the ground.

Jess faced the still men on the porch, his eyes holding a reckless fury. "Any friends of his here?"

Nobody spoke. Jess waited and when Lenny began to stir he shifted his gaze to the fallen man. Kid Lenny groaned, wiped at his already swelling face, bloody from a smashed nose. He shook his head and propped up on his hands. Bleary eyes slowly focussed on Jess.

Jess turned away as Lenny started to pull up, using the hitch rail. Jess was twenty feet away when the noise of the men on the porch who had begun to move a bit, suddenly stopped, Jess wheeled, stroking up his gun, going sideways to his knee.

Lenny's shot bellowed out, and Jess fired twice, sending both bullets through Lenny's left shirt pocket. Kid Lenny stretched to full height, his mouth working for air, then he collapsed.

In the café doorway, Mae Stewart stood frozen, eyes staring. The men on the porch began picking themselves up where they had thrown themselves.

"I'll ask it again," Jess said. "Has anybody got anything to add?"

There was silence. Then a man said, "You're on your own, mister."

Jess punched out the empties, reloaded and holstered his gun, then he turned away to walk to the biggest general store across from the Sago Saloon. He named off a list of supplies, saw them sacked and paid for them. Taking the flour sack in his left hand, he walked out and started for the corral.

A LEAN mean faced old man stepped out of a boxlike adobe, a double barrelled, cocked shotgun leveled on Jess at twenty feet.

"You're under arrest for disturbing the peace, and creating a disturbance. Court now in session. I find you guilty of above named charges plus court costs. You also pay for removing debris from the street. That'll be seventy-five dollars. Pay off!" The shotgun didn't waver from a point on Jess' belly.

The old devil looked like he'd pull the trigger if Jess so much as blinked. "I've only got fifty dollars, Your Honor," Jess said mildly. "Do you reckon I could throw myself on the mercy of the court for tobacco money?" He kept his face solemn. "Maybe I could call on the court again sort of, better heeled, you might say!"

The old man's expression didn't change. "It aint this court's object to pauper a man. Fine commuted to forty-five dollars."

Jess carefully dug up the remaining money from his pocket, and paid out the forty-five, keeping back a gold eagle. The old man sidled around, pocketed the money. "Court's adjourned. Get going!"

Jess left. He walked on to the corral without looking back. He put his supplies in his pack, and as he finished, the big smith appeared.

"See you was in court," he said. "Old devil would have blown you in two if you hadn't payed up."

"That's what I figured," Jess said. "Reckon he has something coming if he buries Lenny."

"He will. Better bring your stuff over to the shop. You can sleep there tonight." At Jess' questioning look, the smith said, "They won't bother me. They'll try to stay out of your way, they want you alive to lead them to the gold. If you don't lead them, look out. They might try to Apache it out of you."

"Thanks," Jess said. "We'll see."

He picked up his pack and carried it back to the blacksmith shop, the big smith walking along with him. Jess dropped the pack by his saddle.

"Rumor says there's near a hundred thousand dollars worth of dust in Scorpion Canyon or thereabouts," Smitty said. "A dangerous thing for a man to know the whereabouts."

"I don't know where it all is," Jess said. "I know where my share and Sam Stewart's is, that's all. The others hid theirs separate."

"That sounds reasonable. How much was there, actual?"

"We had a little over nine thousand each. That would be around fifty-five thousand. I know where eighteen thousand is. Sam was to see my share got to my mother if I didn't make it, I was to see his share got to his girl. I aim to do just that."

"I wish you luck, son. Me, I'm too old and lazy to go hunting gold. I got me a living here. You got a right nice little stake—if you get it."

"You think I won't?"

"Let's say I'm afraid you won't." His eyes were earnest as he studied Jess. "Son, those are treacherous men you're up against, and they want that gold real bad. I've heard some stories they started about you, and the girl believes you're a real stinker."

"She'll just have to believe it then till I get back with the gold."

"You got troubles, Jess. She's engaged Beldon to represent her."

"Beldon? You mean that crook that wears the frock coat?"

"That's right. He's supposed to be a lawyer back east."

"To hell with him." Jess looked at the big man. "Smitty, why are you taking my part? Not that I don't appreciate it, but it's got me wondering."

"Maybe I'm getting a cut."

"Maybe, but I doubt it."

"All right. Dort and Lenny whipsawed my boy and shot him down. The boy wasn't much good, Jess, but he was mine. I hope you win out. I hope it real hard!"

"Thanks, Smitty."

Again the twinkle came back in Smitty's eyes. "Son, I think you're about to have female company. Don't expect no help from old Smitty, not with that look in her eyes. I draw the line at females!"

Jess turned to see Mae Stewart coming toward them from the café. She came straight at them, a determined set to her chin. They both watched the graceful swing of her compact body, the smooth movements, the purposeful tilt of her head.

Jess recalled other things Sam Stewart had said about his daughter, his favorite subject. "She takes after her ma in size, Jess, but she looks like me, not this mug, but real honed down and worked over and pretty. Mae is a real little sweetheart, Jess. Soft as pie if she trusts you, but hard-headed as a mule if she thinks you're trying to take her. Once she sides a person, she goes all out."

MAE STEWART had that "all out" look about her now. She stopped three feet from Jess, her eyes meeting his directly. "You are Jess Westfall, the survivor of the prospecting party that was killed in Scorpion Canyon? You knew my father, Sam Stewart?"

"Yes, to all questions, ma'am. Sam was a particular friend of mine. We had an agree—"

"That, apparently, is quite convenient for you, being the only one left alive. And the only one who knows where the gold is!"

"I don't know where it all is. Just mine and Sam's. I'll see you get your share. Sam and I had that agreement."

"Is that the reason you were sneaking away alone, Mr. Westfall? Is that the reason you refuse to cooperate with my lawyer? Is that why you murdered a man awhile ago?"

Anger crept into Jess' face. "Why, I guess that's exactly why, ma'am," he said.

Her own face flushed angrily. "Well, from now on, Mr. Westfall, you will not be alone. My lawyer will accompany you and see that I get my share."

"And if I object?"

"It will do you absolutely no good to object. He shall merely ride along behind if you insist on being stubborn. I have heard of you Mr. Westfall, and I very much doubt that my father would call you a friend. I have been assured on good authority that you are a wanted outlaw. If you insist on trying to steal the gold you will be placed under a restraining order and made to produce the gold."

Jess looked at Smitty who was closely inspecting a fingernail. "Well, ma'am, that's what I'm trying to do, produce the gold."

"You will have company."

"I don't agree to that. I want to be alive to enjoy my share. No outlaws and killers are going with me."

"Are you calling Mr. Beldon and Mr. Dort killers?"

"Yes."

She was mad as a stamped yellowjacket. "Then," she said, "I'll have to notify the proper officials and have you placed under arrest."

"You do that, ma'am. In the meantime, I'll try to be back with the gold by the time you get to the sheriff."

She was white and shaking. Suddenly she swung at him, a balled fist striking him in the eye before he could dodge. She came at him tooth and nail, and for a minute, Jess had his hands full of wild woman. But finally he had her hands behind her, gripping her wrists, a bulgy bit of woman pressed hard against him, wild brown eyes an inch from his own.

"And thanks for your trust, honey," Jess said. "Old Sam would snort like a trained seal over this." He looked at the eyes, at the lips parted as she panted, then Jess kissed her. "That's to remember old outlaw Jess by. Sam said you had a hard head once you made up your mind."

He released her and she promptly swung at him again. But this time Jess was alert. He dodged the blow and took refuge behind the anvil. For a half minute she glared at him, then whirling, she ran back to the café.

"I think," Smitty drawled, "that the kiss won that fight."

Jess arched an eyebrow then winced and felt the tender member. "Smitty, you reckon she didn't trust me?"

Smitty snorted, then shouted with laughter. "Dang it all, Jess, I bet that was what it was all the time!" He sat down holding his big belly. Jess grinned a little, and stood looking at the café.

"I'll tell you what," Jess said. "I'll buy you a drink."

"And I'll take it, too!"

SNAKE RAKE

A rattlesnake said to her mate:
"How come you to get home so late?
Do you think I'm a goil
Who likes to just coil
And rattle around while I wait?"

By S. Omar Barker

They started for the saloon, and Smitty asked, "How are you going to work it, Jess? Dort and Fite are wolves in the desert. Beldon gives the orders and they do it. But if you should brace him, watch his shoulder gun, the one in his belt is a blind."

"You don't think I can duck them?"

"I doubt it. I'd suggest a shotgun at close quarters before you start. The sheriff will give you a medal."

"I hate to buck them plus the Apaches. What's the real Indian situation?"

"Mostly, they're on the reservations. Just a few broncos loose."

"Can that bay really travel tonight?"

"Yes, just be careful. I can give you a hand, son. I got a pack horse I'll sneak off. You can tie yours at the shop, the bay out

of sight of the hotel, say, and the pack horse in sight. Leave it and take mine. You might get a start that way."

"That's a good idea, Smitty, I'll take you up on it. We'll have that drink and I'll get some sleep."

A man came out of the saloon, slowed and said quickly, "Watch out, Westfall, they're set for you if you jump them like you did Lenny."

"Thanks," Jess said.

"You going to, son?"

Jess' eyes showed his temper, but he shrugged. "I'd be a fool to play their game, Smitty. I'll settle up with them later."

They went into the saloon, and up to the bar. There were over a dozen men in the bar at this early hour which spoke rather eloquently of the citizens' idle natures. Beldon, Dort and Fite were among those present, Jess noted. He also noted that Bill Dort was in the front corner of the barroom, Fite in the back corner, and Beldon at the bar. The man outside hadn't been lying about that, they were all set.

THERE was a glint of anger in Jess' eyes as he and Smitty had their first drink. He would like nothing better than a showdown with these three but they were ready, they had him whipsawed. But Beldon's presence at the bar indicated that they wouldn't start a ruckus. Beldon wanted to talk.

At Smitty's nod, the bartender poured them a second drink. "On me," Smitty said. He shot Jess a warning glance as Beldon eased down the bar to them.

Chan Beldon was a lean man, actually a consumptive from his color and the burning eyes. His frock coat smelled of sweat, and his shirt was dirty.

"If I may interrupt, Mr. Westfall," Beldon said, "I'm Chan Beldon. I have the honor of representing Miss Stewart in the matter of her father's estate. I should greatly appreciate your cooperation."

Jess looked at him coldly. "Cut the windy buildup, Beldon. You and your murdering friends want to steal the gold, so get on with your try."

Beldon said blandly, "I'm sorry to see you take that attitude, Mr. Westfall, but I can understand a man's big dreams, but this girl is destitute but for her father's share. I'm sure you can see she needs it."

"I'll see that she gets it," Jess said.

"I'm afraid it isn't that simple, Mr. Westfall. She does not trust you and has engaged me to represent her. I'm afraid I must insist on accompanying you. I'm sure you understand."

"I understand this," Jess said. "You and your jackals stole my pack horse yesterday, lamed my bay, and left me hemmed by Apaches." His face reddened as his temper flamed, and he turned a little to get Fite under his attention, and Dort in the corner of his eye. "That, Beldon, makes you a dirty son as well as a horse thief."

There was a dead silence in the saloon, every eye on the two men. Those were fighting words anywhere. But it was no secret that Jess Westfall was the only man alive who knew where that gold was, and everyone knew that Beldon wanted that gold. Beldon was whiter than his natural paleness, and his eyes shone pure murder at Jess Westfall.

Jess' grin was hard with no humor in it. "You want that gold, Beldon, not to give to the girl, but for yourself. You can fool her but not me. You're not accompanying me anywhere, and when I start again, it'll be open season on you. Now move away and stop stinking up the air." His hand cracked on Beldon's face, heeling the man backward.

"I'll watch Dort," Smitty said quietly.

Jess kept his attention on Beldon, saw the trembling of the man's hands that gripped the bar. The desire to kill was in his eyes. Beyond him, Bat Fite's hands were on the table, his eyes pinned in something like fascination on Beldon.

Beldon made two attempts to speak before he succeeded. "Westfall, I shall take great pleasure in killing you for this, but later. At the moment, there is a fine girl depending on me to protect her share of gold. Once that is over, sir, I shall see to you."

"One thing about you, Beldon, you're a slick tongue. You think you can kill me now with two other men whipsawing me, but that'd lose you the gold, wouldn't it? Well, I don't think you can do it, so make your try."

For a half minute, gray eyes locked with burning brown ones, then Beldon turned and walked unsteadily into a back room. Neither Dort nor Fite made any move.

Jess turned and walked out, Smitty trailing him. Once outside the blacksmith wiped a string of sweat from his forehead with a crooked finger. "Son," he said earnestly to Jess, "I don't believe my old heart would hold up having many drinks with you."

"I'd have liked to kill all three of them," Jess said angrily.

"I thought there for a minute that you didn't like them," Smitty drawled.

Jess looked at the smith then grinned. "Thanks, Smitty, for backing me. I guess my temper was out of hand."

At the blacksmith shop, Jess said, "I think I'll get some sleep, Smitty."

Suddenly, he went still as Mae Stewart stepped out of Smitty's small quarters, a leveled .32 revolver in her hand. Her eyes were flaring, determined, and a little scared.

"Mr. Westfall, I'm sorry about this, but it is the only recourse I seem to have. The only law here is locked in his room with a bottle. So, I must disarm you, and insist that we start at once for the gold. I shall accompany you myself."

"Ma'am, that won't be necessary. I'll see that you get your share, every dime. I promised Sam I would. Scorpion Canyon is no place for a man, much less a woman."

For a moment she seemed to waver, studying him, then her jaw settled. "I'm afraid I can't trust you under the circumstances, Mr. Westfall. Your reputation is, well, unsavory, to say the least. I shall go and Mr. Beldon and his packers will be ample protection. The Apaches, for the most part, are on the reservations. Please drop your gun."

"Why, sure, ma'am, if you think that's best."

JESS unbuckled his gunbelt, then holding the holster to prevent the gun slipping out, he looked around for a place to put it. "Sorry, ma'am, this is a good gun and I don't want cinders in it."

He stepped over, reaching out to lay the gun on a smoke black table. He could almost feel her relax, and the move had put him in reach of her. His hand whipped around, slapping the gun out of her hand. It exploded, bringing a shower of dust down from the sheet iron roof as the bullet went through. Jess picked up the gun. He ejected the shells, passed the gun back to her.

"Better keep that, ma'am, however, it won't be much protection against your lawyer." He buckled his belt back on.

She stood stiffly, and two tears coursed down her cheeks, then she turned and walked away.

Neither Jess nor Smitty said anything. Smitty busied himself at some chore, and Jess took his blankets and sought the shade on the west side of the shed. He stretched out there but did not fall asleep at once. He kept seeing two brown eyes, direct and frank, wide lips that could curve into a smile to melt a lump of coal. He kept turning and muttering, and twice Smitty peered back at him, and finally grinned knowingly and went whistling about his business.

Jess slept until the sun moved over to shine on him, then he moved his blanets to the shade and went back to sleep. Just before sundown, Smitty woke him. They ate at the café, served by a silent Mae Stewart, and later they played cards for a couple of hours, and went back to the smith to gossip. About nine o'clock, Jess caught up his horses, and tied them at the shed, spreading his blankets again in the nook where the leanto living quarters connected onto the smithy. It was obvious he intended to have his horses beside him all night.

Smitty held a short conference with a Mexican, and at midnight he woke Jess again. "Beldon, Dort and Fite went up to their rooms at the hotel. The pack horse is staked three hundred yards straight south of this shop."

"They wouldn't trust me to stay," Jess said. "They'll have this place staked out."

Smitty grinned. "They did. Dort was here till just awhile ago. Then they hired a man to watch, they wanted some rest in case you did light out, I reckon."

"Where's the stakeout?"

"Yonder by that old broken wagon," Smitty answered. "I rapped him over the head and tied him up. He won't report anything tonight."

Jess grinned. "Smitty, when I get that gold out, I'm going to buy you the reddest silk undershirt money can buy."

"I always wanted a silk undershirt," Smitty said. "A real red one!"

Jess silently saddled the bay, hung his pack on the horn and gripped Smitty's hand, then he led the horse away into the darkness. He found the pack horse, secured his pack, and a few minutes later was riding south-east. His destination was Rock Seeps thirty miles away, and well south of the previous route where his pack horse had been stolen. That might throw them off for awhile if they got excited and lit out, but Beldon wasn't likely to do that. The Seeps had another advantage, too. From the high rocks above, he could see practically all the way to Sago Springs. He could judge his lead at daylight and make his move from there.

The bay held up without trouble, showing tenderness only in the roughest places which Jess avoided when possible. This left a plain trail but it couldn't be helped. He made the Seeps just before dawn, watered his horses after scouting the place, then rode the quarter mile to the rock pinnacles.

He staked his horses, fed them a ration of grain, and climbed to a high point that had a circular bowl some twenty feet in diameter handy. He napped for an hour, until good light then studied his back trail. He saw no movement, and slept another hour.

With the sun nearly two hours high, the translucent haze gone from the land, he again studied his back trail, and saw nothing. This worried him and he remained there for an hour. Still nothing.

The harsh, nerve shattering sound of a cocking single action Colt's froze him spread eagled on the boulder. Slowly, then he turned his head.

Bat Fite stood ten feet behind him, the six-shooter leveled at Jess, a grin on his broad face, but his little eyes were deadly.

"That's it, Jesse boy," Fite said. "Just take it easy. Now lock your hands behind your neck and slide down there. Move!"

Jess obeyed, then when he stood on his feet, Fite ordered him to drop the gunbelt beside the rifle that leaned at the base of the boulder. He moved away from the arms at Fite's order.

Fite shouted, "Chan! Come on up!"

"Have you got him?"

"I got him!"

Beldon, Dort and Mae Stewart came scrambling up into the bowl. Jess stared at Mae Stewart. Chan Beldon grinned at Jess Westfall but there was little amusement in his smile.

"You can thank her, Westfall. That damn blacksmith laid out our stakeout, but Miss Stewart was watching on her own."

"That was her mistake," Jess said. "As she will now find out."

"You won't be so sassy shortly, Mr. Westfall," Beldon said. "I've taken more from you than any man. Now it's my turn. Sing low, Westfall, sing low."

"I wanted to bust a couple of his knees," Fite said. "A man dies slow in the desert with his legs busted. But was he tough? Hell, he was meek as a lamb."

Mae Stewart's glances had been running from one to the other, and Jess could see the doubt that was growing apprehension in her. She said, "I'm sure we won't have any more trouble with Mr. Westfall now. He is unarmed, and there isn't anything he can do but let us accompany him. Isn't that true, Mr. Beldon?"

"Why, sure, honey, that's quite true. We won't have any more trouble with Jess Westfall, will we, Bat?"

Bat Fite grinned. "No trouble. From now on it will be fun."

Mae said quickly, "You will guide us there now, won't you Mr. Westfall?"

"Sure," Fite said, "Won't you, Mr. Westfall?"

"You can go to hell," Jess said.

Bill Dort, who had eased up close to Jess, six-shooter in hand, said, "Watch that talk, don't you know there's a lady present?"

MAE STEWART was quite pale now. She may have been a greenhorn, but she was beginning to catch on now. "Please, gentlemen," she said. "Please allow me to talk to Mr. Westfall."

Dort swung his six-shooter suddenly, and even expecting it, Jess could not dodge the blow. The barrel hit him a glancing blow, knocking him down. Dort kicked him.

Jess grunted, lashed out with both feet, to kick Dort's feet from under him. He went onto Dort, slamming a savage blow at his throat, bringing an elbow around to smash the man's nose. He kneed Dort in the belly. Then Jess' head seemed to explode as Fite hit him a solid blow behind the ear with his six-shooter barrel.

When Jess woke up, he was tied hand and foot. He lay there, waiting for his head to clear and stop spinning. Dimly, he heard a voice say, "I think he's coming around."

Water splashed over Jess, getting in his mouth and up his nose. He sneezed and sputtered, but when his eyes cleared of water he was fully conscious, and with a splitting headache.

Fite stood over him with a canteen, Bill Dort nearby, glowering, his nose swollen and bloody. Beldon sat on a rock, watching, Mae Stewart near him. The girl looked pale and beaten, and Jess knew that she at last realized the predicament she had gotten into.

"Well, Jess," Beldon asked, "Are you ready to take us to the gold? Or tell us where in Scorpion Canyon it is hidden?"

"I can't tell you where any of it is except mine and Sam Stewart's. I'll see you in hell before I tell you that. Go hunt it."

"We did, but we had no luck. You will tell us. Won't he, Bat?"

"He sure will," Bat Fite said, grinning.

"I get him first," Dort snarled. "I owe him a few."

"Just don't let your temper get away, Bill," Beldon said. "We want him to live long enough to talk. Bat here is an artist, he enjoys it." "I won't kill him if that's what you mean," Dort said sullenly. "But I aim to hear him holler."

"Have your fun, Bill, but stay away from his face. I want him able to talk."

Bat Fite was building up a small fire near the far wall, and Bill Dort brought a rope and ran it around Jess' body, under his arms. Then Dort threw the rope over an outcropping of rock and tried to haul Jess erect. He struggled and cursed until Fite left his fire to help him. When they had Jess hanging with only his feet on the ground, Dort secured the rope and Fite went back to the fire he had in a small smokeless blaze.

Bill Dort stuck his bearded face almost against Jess'. "Now, damn you, you're going to pay for that big talk in that saloon and for busting my nose. I'm going to beat you to a pulp!"

Jess planted his feet as solidly as he could, and rammed his head forward, his forehead, slamming into Dort's already broken nose. Bill Dort screamed, reeled backward and sat down heavily, hands covering his nose that streamed anew with blood. He was almost crying, cursing and shouting all at once.

Then he lunged to his feet, jerking out his pistol. Fite's lunging body hit him, knocking him down, sending the pistol skidding away. Fite stuck his cocked pistol in Dort's throat, grinning while he did it.

"Bill, we want him alive, remember? You want me and Chan to split two ways?"

Dort's face was white, his rage forgotten. "All right, Bat. I was just going to hammer him with it."

"Use your fists," Fite said. "I'll take care of the rest of it. I know how to keep him alive."

He let Dort up, and the bearded man retrieved his six-shooter, holstered it and planted himself in front of Jess, his rage returning.

Jess spit in his face. Dort bawled with rage, and swung, his fist striking Jess' jaw, turning him half around.

"Stay off that face, damn you!" yelled Beldon.

Dort didn't seem to hear, but his next blow caught Jess in the back, over the kidney, and Dort kept hammering, slugging and cursing. His very fury was some protection. Jess took those blows with clinched teeth, watching his chance, and when it came, his balance right, he drew up his bound legs, shot them forward. His boots caught Dort in the belly, sending him back and down again. Dort came up with a howl, and dived headon into Jess. His head hit Jess in the stomach, but Jess' drawn up legs helped break the force. He shoved Dort off again, and when the man came again, Jess kicked him in the face.

It was a solid blow this time, and it addled Dort. When he sat down he remained there, wobbling, mouthing curses not understandable. Beldon stepped forward and took Dort's gun.

Fite laughed. "Jess, I'm going to enjoy working with you. Damned if you ain't nearly beat old Bill to death and you tied up like a branding calf."

Bill Dort got to his feet, cursing and raging, but a snarled order from Fite quelled him. "You've had your fun, Bill, now I'll have mine. Sit down and shut up!"

BAT FITE pulled a sheath knife and stuck the blade into the small blaze. He grinned at Jess. "You've had your fun, too, Jesse boy. Get ready to start blabbing. I'm going to work on you gentle like at first but just clam up and you'll end up on an ant hill with your eyelids cut off and your stomach open to the weather. Start thinking about it."

Jess said nothing. He knew what Fite meant, the Apache treatment.

Mae Stewart who had sat through Dort's raging with tight lips was now on her feet, face dead white, eyes staring with horror. "You wouldn't dare! That—that's savagery. The gold isn't that important."

"You ain't got a damn thing to say about it, missy," Fite said. "We strung along with you, because Kid and Beldon wanted you. We aim to get the gold and to hell with you. Chan can throw you to the dogs when he's done with you."

Mae Stewart, Jess thought, must have realized for some minutes now what she had gotten into, but to hear it bluntly, brutally put, froze her in her tracks. But the girl had the bottom that Sam had claimed.

She spoke so calmly that it astonished Jess. "I see. Then I have been a fool, of course, all the stories you fed me about Jess Westfall were lies. You're the outlaws and killers, he's the honest one."

"Well, what do you know?" Fite said, grinning at her. "Chan, she's finally getting wise. I didn't know even an eastern female could be as stupid as she's been." He laughed. "But you're right, missy, we're after the gold, and after I get the location out of Jess and I'm sure he's not lying, then I aim to stick this knife in his belly. I doubt that Chan will let you go loose to blab after he's had his fun either."

"Get on with it, Bat," Beldon said.

"I'll just do that," Bat Fite said. He pulled the glowing blade from the fire, walked toward Jess.

He stopped, keeping out of reach of Jess' feet and head. He ripped the front out of Jess' shirt. He jammed a boot on Jess' feet, and held the knife point, smoking and turning blue under Jess' nose.

"Smell it, sonny? Are you ready to start telling old Bat about your little gold sacks?"

"Please!" Mae cried. "Oh, please don't. I'll give you my part, I'll sign it over to you legally. Jess will tell you where his is, won't you, Jess? Please, tell them, if they'll promise to let you go."

"Sure, Jess," Fite said. "We'll promise, won't we, Chan?"

"Naturally," Beldon said.

"Then I'll stamp his brains out," Dort snarled.

The girl was crying in her horror and helplessness, her eyes wildly desperate.

Fite laughed. "Now stop carrying on, honey, you might get to like this."

Suddenly, Fite slapped the blade to Jess' breast. There was a small searing sound, smoke boiled upward in a stinking wave of burned flesh and hair.

"See, Jess?" Fite said. "I wasn't joking, was I?" He drew the blade slowly across Jess' stomach.

Mae Stewart screamed. She staggered away, retching then collapsed against the rock wall near Jess' arms. They were watching Fite and paid her no attention.

She was shooting before they knew it. She was showing those traits of which Sam had bragged to Jess. She was slapping lead out of Jess' Henry like a veteran. She wasn't connecting with all of those bullets and they howled and screamed about the bowl. But some of them hit their target. Fite wheeled, grabbed his belly then he threw up his hands as a bullet tore half of his head away. He fell.

Before he had hit the ground, she had the rifle turned on Beldon and Dort. Both were to far to reach her, and Dort was unarmed, but Beldon still had his six-shooter. They both hit the passageway together. Mae kept firing, and those bullets ricohetting in that passageway made enough racket to scare bigger men than Beldon and Dort, and any second one of

those flattened slugs might tear their heads off. They kept going at full speed.

Mae was running to Jess while the echoes of her shots were still bouncing off the rocks. She snatched up the knife, cut Jess down then cut his bonds.

"Good work, Mae," he said, as he lunged to his feet. "Stay here!"

He grabbed up his gunbelt as he ran, snaking out the six-shooter, and went into the passageway after the other two.

He had to get to the horses in time to stop them or all this would have to be done again. Beldon would pick up more men this time, renegades like Fite and Dort.

Jess stopped at the end of the passageway, popped his hat out, and a gun bellowed. The slug jerked the hat, cried off the rock. He heard Beldon's voice lift.

"Get to the horses, Bill, while I keep him in there, then use your saddle gun."

If they got those horses they'd be gone, they'd leave him and Mae Stewart afoot to be picked up at leisure. Beldon might be expecting another dodge with the hat—and he might not.

Jess bobbed the hat, and Beldon fired again, and Jess knew then he would have to take his chances. Beldon would fire at anything until Dort opened up with his rifle.

JESS went out in a flat dive, and Beldon's bullet raked his shoulder blade. Jess grabbed his gun with his left hand, rolled as Beldon's next bullet spewed gravel on him. Beldon had one more shot and he wouldn't waste it too speedily.

Jess aimed and fired as Beldon made himself take careful aim. Beldon jerked and his last shot went wild. He turned and ran, his right arm clamped to his side.

Jess steadied his gun but just as he pressed the trigger, Dort shot and the bullet threw sand over Jess, in his eyes. He blinked furiously, rolled to gain the cover of a small boulder and outcropping. He poked his gunbarrel in that slot and fired once blindly. Dort's lead screamed off the outcropping.

Jess had two more bullets, he took his time and got Dort into focus, forcing himself to ignore the grainy pain in his eyes. He rested the gun on the boulder and fired twice.

Dort stiffed, came up on tiptoes then fell on his face. Beldon gained the horses, flung himself into the saddle as Jess tried to punch the empties from his gun, with his still numb and tingling right hand. He'd never make it and he knew it.

Beldon had snaked his rifle from the boot, three shots dropped Dort's, Mae's and Fite's horses. Then Beldon rammed his horse with the spurs, pulling it around toward Jess' stock.

"Jess!" Mae cried behind him. "Jess, here's your rifle, I got six shells into it."

He wheeled, grabbed the rifle out of the air as she tossed it to him. Beldon had heard that cry, saw the rifle, and he left the saddle, his rifle steadying as he kneeled.

"Back, Mae!" Jess shouted. He flattened out as Beldon's lead splashed on the rock. "Stay back out of sight."

Beldon had seized the opportunity to seek cover himself, and was now behind a waist high boulder. Jess waited now, he had as much time as Beldon. The renegade wouldn't dare try for his horse.

Jess shot a glance toward his horses then at Beldon's cover, and let out a sigh of relief. From his position, Beldon couldn't shoot them. He'd have to move, and when he did. . .

"Jess?"

Jess didn't look around but Mae was close behind. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry. I deserve anything from you. I wouldn't blame you if you knocked me over the head."

Jess said solemnly, "Maybe I ought to and take all that gold."

"You ought to."

"Sam always said you were pretty as a peach and stubborn as a mule."

"I—I guess I'm the last, all right."

Jess gave her a hasty glance, and grinned. She stood contritely, head down, but he caught a flash of dark eyes. "Well, maybe I'll just keep you for a pet."

She didn't say anything.

Beldon fired, the bullet breathing past Jess' ear. Jess waited, sliding down the rock, near the base, the snout of his rifle waiting. He saw a bulge at Beldon's boulder but still waited. Then he saw the bulge grow larger centered it and fired.

Beldon jumped, exposing an entire shoulder

and Jess put a bullet in it. The shock staggered Beldon, brought him out. He brought up his rifle desperately, triggering off a shot one-handed. Jess fired and hit him twice more in the chest, and watched him collapse.

"I think that about winds it up, Mae," he said.

She didn't say anything, and he turned to look at her. She was sitting on the ground, her hands and shoulders shaking, her lips trembling while tears ran down her cheeks.

He hurried to her, lifted her up, ignoring the twinge of his shoulder blade. "Here, here, now, it's all over. We're safe now."

He knew it was shock working on her now, reaction. Up to now, anger, horror, excitement, had kept her going. Now the shock was getting to her. He held her closely and she clung to him crying.

After awhile she quieted. "I'm sorry, Jess. I ought not to cry on your shoulder, I deerve —"

"Hush now," he said. He still held her, and figured he could get to like it—in fact he already did! "You stop blaming yourself, Beldon was an expert at con work. It's a wonder he didn't have you shoot me." He lifted her chin and grinned at her. "Chin up, honey, Sam always said you couldn't keep a Stewart down unless you buried him down, real deep."

She smiled, a little shakily. "He was always saying that. And like the other day, it was only yesterday, when you said, snort like a seal, that was Daddy. I almost believed you then. I wish I had."

He made her sit down. "You stay there until I round up all this gear. We'll go back to town, I'll go get that gold."

"All right, Jess. I'll trust you this time, and be thankful for you."

"You might have to take that back. I may be hard to get rid of. I'm some stubborn myself."

She smiled, and the smile was all that Jess knew it would be. He felt like a tall wide man, and had to stifle the yips that rose to his lips. Yes sir, he was going to be a hard man for Mae Stewart to get rid of. By grabs, a man had to get married sometime, he couldn't just bat around till old age took him, could he?

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. Jim Bridger, Kit Carson, Bill Williams, and Jim Beckworth were scouts, outlaws, sheriffs, or Texas Rangers?

2. Each of these Western wild animals is also known by another name: (1) elk, (2) buffalo, (3) antelope, (4) javelina. What are the other names?

3. Stampede, Arizona, Arrowsmith, Shotgun, Brushbeater, Bullhide, Angora, Range Rider, Batwing all refer to styles in cowboy chaps, hats, boots, or jackets?

4. Waggoner, King, Kendricks, Chisum, Goodnight, Greene, Boice, and Mitchell are all famous names in what Western industry?

5. One of the largest Federal game refuges in the United States is the National Elk Refuge, located adjacent to Jackson Hole, in what state?

6. Eighty-seven persons died when what wagon train of immigrants was trapped by deep snows in the Sierra Nevadas in 1846?

7. Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders, veterans of a war with Spain, hold their annual reunion in which city called Las Vegas, the one in New Mexico or the one in Nevada?

8. Was a Comanchero (Co-mahn-CHAY-ro) a man married to a Comanche squaw, a man who traded with Comanches, or one who fought them?

9. What living things in the far West are from 3,000 to 4,000 years old?

10. The giant *saguaro* (also spelled *sahuaro*) cactus grows only in Mexico and in what state?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 60. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

THE PEACEMAKER

By J. L. BOUMA

Even a veteran lawman can learn more about life and love—and law

THE SIGN that hung from the crossbar above the ranch gate said: BROKEN BIT. Will Croft unlatched the gate, reined his cow pony inside, and gazed at the rolling green hills in the afternoon sunlight. Wild oaks filled the hollows and cattle grazed on the slopes. All very peaceful, Will thought. Yet this was where he might end up with more trouble than he could handle.

Not that he was worried. As a special operative for a Southwestern detective bureau, he had hunted outlaws longer than he cared to remember. The knowledge that there were any number of men who would rejoice at the news of his death, left him cold. He handled the cases assigned to him to the best of his ability, and he had no regrets.

Will closed the gate and urged his pony

forward with the heel of a worn boot, a roughly-put-together man with a craggy brown face and thick black hair. He needed a shave, and his range garb was stained and wrinkled. To the casual eye he was just another stray puncher, and he looked the part. It was this ability to blend with his background that had often helped him in his work. He had, depending on the case, passed himself off as a prospector, stagecoach driver, shotgun guard, outlaw, cowhand and mule skinner, and he had handled each role without fuss or bother.

The road swung between two hills and then Will caught his first glimpse of the ranch buildings. They were located in a grove of fir trees, and a creek gurgled nearby. The house, barn and sheds were whitewashed, the roofs painted red. As Will rode forward, he reflected that Mercer, the local law, had been right in saying that Broken Bit was a right tidy ranch.

Will entered the yard where clucking hens scratched the ground around a yellow mound of hay. There were several horses in the corral, and a black bull grunted in his enclosure. Will tied his horse at the corral fence and turned as the sound of chopping reached him. He investigated and found a woman belaboring a thick log with an ax as well as with a sharp tongue.

"Dang you! I'll chop you to kindling before I'm through! And it'll tickle my britches to see you burn."

Will regarded her thoughtfully, thinking she was an apple pie kind of woman, pleasingly plump, with hair the color of new-mown hay. She straightened and took a healthy breath and then saw Will, and her angry blue eyes covered him from his worn boots to the crown of his scarecrow hat. He couldn't be sure, but it seemed to him that a sudden wariness narrowed her gaze.

"Dang it!" she said. "If this ain't the orneriest chunk of wood that I've ever laid an ax to, then I'm getting forgetful!"

"Takes a man to chop wood," Will drawled.

She gave him another close scrutiny. "Seems to me you're a man," she said then, and handed him the ax. Will grinned and went to work. The woman stepped back and watched.

"I swear and declare, a body never catches up with the chores around here," she said. And then, "Riding the grub line?"

Will paused long enough to say, "Yes'm. I've been looking for work."

"It's hard to find during the summer. Johnny and Judy've been doing all the work on my place since spring branding." She paused as if waiting for Will's comment. When he did not answer, she said, "Well, you fill my wood box and I'll set you up a meal. The box is on the back porch. See to it that you fill it plumb full, you hear? And wash up after you're done. I don't take kindly to dirty hands at my table."

She turned toward the house. Will looked after her, thinking he'd been wrong about her being an apple pie kind of woman—she was more the steak and potatoes kind. Her name, he knew, was Martha Reed. A right pretty name, Martha. She was a widow, too. The kind of a widow, as he had told Sam Bruner, that he was looking for.

Chopping steadily, Will remembered that after tying up his last assignment, he'd returned to the Denver office to hand in his resignation. But Sam Bruner had beat him to the draw by saying something important.

"There's a chance we can put Hugh Hauser and the two remaining members of his old gang where they belong, behind bars."

Will grunted. Two years ago, Hauser and his bad bunch had come close to putting the Rocky Mountain Stage & Freight Company out of business by holding up five of their stages carrying gold bullion from the Clear Creek Mines. The loss had run close to $80,000, a sum the company would have had to make good if it hadn't been for the tipster who had double-crossed the gang.

Now all but three members of the gang were serving time. Hugh Hauser and his right hand man, Curly Jim, as well as an outlaw known as Johnny Kid had been away from the hideout when the posse closed in and recovered the bullion.

Will found himself curious enough to ask, "What did you find out?"

BRUNER said that two days ago the local police had picked up an outlaw named Tobin as a suspect in a robbery. "Detective Bramer was in to see me yester-

day. Told me that Tobin talked in order to try and save his skin. Seems he knows Hauser's on the wanted list, so he told Bramer where the law could catch Hauser and Curly Jim and Johnny Kid, all at the same time." Bruner paused. "Bramer passed the news on to me for what it's worth, and it should be worth plenty. Now I want you to—"

"Nothing doing," Will interrupted. "I told you last month that I meant to resign. Hell, I'm getting older than Mexico. And now that I've got a little money put away, I mean to buy me a ranch, find me a plump widow woman, and settle down."

Sam Bruner grinned. "First let me tell you what Tobin had to say. Seems he ran into Johnny Kid about six months ago. This was in New Mexico, in a little town called Duoro, west of Santa Fé. Tobin and the Kid knew each other from way back, so they had a drink. But the Kid didn't have much to say, and Tobin got curious. He talked to the bartender after the Kid left, and learned that he works on a local ranch, the Broken Bit outfit, and calls himself John Carter."

"What's that got to do with Hauser?" Will demanded.

"I'm coming to that. Two days before Tobin was picked up, he ran into Hauser and Curly Jim in a saloon. According to Tobin, who knows 'em both, Hauser and Curly Jim met up again less than a month ago. Seems they ran in opposite directions and lost track of each other after we rounded up the rest of the gang. Anyway, they talked over old times, and Tobin mentioned when and where he had seen Johnny Kid. It seems the news pleased Hauser no end on account of he thinks the Kid is the one who double-crossed the gang."

Will pursed his lips, remembering that not even Bruner had learned the tipster's identity. Whoever it was, had worked directly with the Rocky Mountain company people. It had been a simple, if shady, agreement, but one that was often made between outlaws and their victims. In this case, the tipster had contacted a company official and had guaranteed the return of the bullion if the company would pay a "reward" of $10,000 and promise to keep the tipster's identity a secret. The company had agreed and had paid off, rather than suffer the loss of the bullion shipments.

"Again according to Tobin," Bruner went on, "Hauser and Curly Jim are riding south to find and kill Johnny Kid. That's where you come in. I want you to —"

"Hold on," Will interrupted again. "If those two left here four days ago, it'll be another week before they cross over into New Mexico. So let the law handle it. You can bet that every sheriff and cowtown marshal along the line will be looking for those boys, so I see no reason to join in the hunt."

"You seem to forget that Hauser's a smart hombre. So's Curly Jim. Tobin's the only one that's laid eyes on 'em in the past couple of years, and I'll lay odds they dodge the law all the way to the border. And once they hit New Mexico territory, they'll be pretty well in the clear. So the best time to grab them is when they move in on Johnny Kid."

"What makes you think the Kid's still working on that ranch?"

"Maybe he isn't. Even so, you'll still have a chance at the other two. They're worth a thousand apiece, and I'd like us to get the credit of rounding them up."

"I told you I'm resigning!"

Bruner grinned mockingly. "You won't resign, and you wouldn't be happy if you tried. You're a man hunter, Will. It's in your blood."

Will made a sound of anger and reached for the badge that was pinned to the inner side of his belt. "Won't resign, huh?"

"Leave that badge where it belongs," Bruner said sharply. And then, in a softer tone, "In case you've forgotten, Hauser killed Dan Martin."

Will lowered his hands slowly, a scowl on his brown face. Of course he hadn't forgotten, for he and Dan had been good friends. It was Dan who had been assigned to work on the case while the gang was still operating. He had followed a lead on Hauser to a dance-hall woman who called herself Brazil. Dan had found Hauser in her cabin and had been killed when he tried to capture the outlaw.

"Brazil," Will said softly. "Remember? She was some woman, and from what I learned when I hunted Hauser, he was crazy about her. She went to San Francisco not long after we rounded up his gang. I've often wondered if he followed her there."

Bruner said, "And I've often wondered if he told her the location of the hideout, and if she's the one that double-crossed him and collected the ten thousand."

"You're wrong," Will said, thinking of the weeks he had spent hunting Hauser. "I must've questioned a dozen people who knew him, and if I learned anything about him at all it's that he plays it close to the vest."

"And how do you figure to play it?" Bruner asked softly.

Will took a deep breath. "You win," he growled. "But it's for the last time, understand?" He had nodded emphatically at Sam Bruner, and walked out.

HE HAD caught the train to Santa Fé, had purchased the cow pony and arrived at the dusty little town of Duoro that morning. He had cleared with the local marshal, a gruff oldster named Mercer, who had shown less interest in the case than he might have.

"I can't say I like it," Mercer had said, after listening to Will's story. "Johnny Carter hit town a couple of weeks after you people rounded up Hauser's gang. Flat broke when he got here, which means he didn't collect that ten thousand. Went to work for Martha Reed at Broken Bit. Martha lived through some hard times while her no-good husband was still around. Then after he got himself killed in a brawl, Martha and her daughter Judy kept the ranch going. How, I don't know, but they done it. Then Johnny went to work for his board and tobacco money. He really took hold. Combed a lot of wild stuff out of the hills, stuff that hadn't been branded as yet. He sold them off and used the money to make improvements. Right now Broken Bit's one of the nicest little spreads around here, and Martha's able to breathe easy for the first time in years. And it's mainly due to the way Johnny took hold and worked the place. So even if he did make a mistake, I wouldn't hold it against him now." Mercer paused, added hopefully, "Anyhow, you could be after the wrong man."

"I'll know the answer to that when I see him," Will had said....

He finished splitting the log into neat chunks. After filling the wood box, he took his shaving gear from his saddlebags and washed and shaved at the bench by the back door. His wet hair held the marks of his comb when he entered the cheerful kitchen.

Martha Reed turned from the stove and eyed him carefully. She seemed satisfied by his appearance. She introduced herself with the brisk air of a woman who tends to get things out in the open. Will said his name was Henry Taber, using the alias because Johnny Kid was sure to have heard of Will Croft, the man hunter. She told him to sit down and then brought him a platter heaped high with steak, potatoes, corn and string beans. Will ate hungrily, thinking he'd never tasted better cooking. After cleaning the platter and then finishing a huge slab of apple pie, he leaned back and sighed with content.

"I've got to hand it to you, Mrs. Reed," he said. He grinned then, added slyly, "Why, a man'd be tempted to work for his board, just for the chance to put his feet under your table."

She beamed at him, and a blush reddened her cheeks. "Now that's a right nice compliment, Mr. Taber."

At that moment, riders entered the yard. Martha Reed turned to the window and announced the arrival of Johnny and Judy. She went out, and Will followed. He saw the girl—a blonde, tanned girl—gallop across the yard, laughing. She slid down and cried, "Beat you!" as Johnny Carter rode up, grinning.

Carter had seen Will's horse, and now his gaze swung and found Will. His grin faded and his face turned to stone as he slipped carefully out of the saddle.

Will knew that look; he'd seen it often enough. It was the wary stiffness that settled on a wanted man's face when he was suddenly confronted by a stranger who might or might not be packing a badge. Will read that look and knew without a doubt that this was the outlaw who had called himself Johnny Kid.

He was black-haired and good-looking, lean as a hound and not much older than the girl. About twenty-three, Will guessed. The Kid stood there, not taking his eyes from Will.

The girl didn't seem to notice. She was stroking her pony's nose, smiling at Will. It

made Will suppose that she knew nothing about an outlaw named Johnny Kid.

Martha Reed, on the other hand, was eyeing him sharply. Will made out he didn't notice. He stood there like a poor relation at the family reunion. But he kept the thumb of his right hand hooked in his belt above the butt of his gun. For the Kid was armed, and a man could never be sure which way an outlaw would turn.

The widow said suddenly, brightly, "This though." He looked up, his eyes slitted.

Will guessed why he had made the offer. For Will might turn out to be a lawman, and this was the Kid's way of testing him.

"I'd admire to help out," Will said. "A man eats poorly on the trail, and I'd be a fool to pass up your ma's cooking."

Judy uttered a laugh at this, then said quickly, "Excuse me for laughing, Mr. Taber, but Martha is *my* mother, not Johnny's. We're not even related."

"What a bunch of squares. Haven't they ever heard of the Mombo?"

is Mr. Taber. He chopped wood for me in exchange for a meal. Why, he enjoyed my cooking so much that he offered to work for only his board and room." This wasn't true, and Will looked at her quickly. But she was smiling at Johnny Kid, saying, "What do you think, Johnny? Think we can use Mr. Taber for a week or two?"

The Kid's eyes continued to dig at Will's face, and his mouth shaped a refusal. But finally he lowered his head and said slowly, "Could use some help fixing fence as soon as we get the wire. Keep us busy for a couple of weeks. Don't know as you'd care to bother,

She sounded quite happy about it. And the stiffness eased from around the Kid's mouth. Will found himself grinning. He had lulled the Kid's suspicions somewhat by calling the widow his mother, a fact that any lawman would know was not true. Now there would be little or nothing to worry about until Hauser and Curly Jim arrived on the scene.

AFTER breakfast the following morning, Martha told Will to hitch up the work wagon. "We have to go to town after wire and supplies, and I want to get an early start," she explained.

Johnny and Judy were staying home. Will didn't like to leave the Kid out of his sight, but there wasn't a thing he could do about it. Not at the moment, anyway. But after he returned from town he would have to stick as close to the Kid as possible. Unless they had trouble on the trail, Hauser and Curly Jim should show in two or three days, four at the most. The chances were that they would try to catch the Kid out in the open. Kill him and run. Will knew he would have to move fast when the time came, or lose out altogether.

While he was hitching up, Will thought over what had happened last evening. He and the Kid had hit the blankets soon after supper, in a shed that passed for a bunkhouse. Before they fell asleep, the Kid had asked a number of seemingly-casual questions about Will's past. Will had answered them in an equally-casual tone, knowing the Kid was still suspicious and trying to trap him into making a false statement.

The Kid wasn't dumb by a long shot. On the surface, he had reformed, but underneath he was still as wary as any other outlaw.

Will drove around to the house, and Martha Reed joined him on the high seat. She turned to wave at Johnny and her daughter as they drove out of the yard.

The widow was strangely silent all the way to town. Now and again, Will found her watching him. He kept his own eyes busy as they entered town, a picture of Hauser and Curly Jim in his mind. He had never seen either of them, but he had heard them described more than once, so that he had a pretty good idea of how they were put together.

Hauser was strong, dangerous, a big man with black, piercing eyes, the eyes of a killer. Curly Jim, tall, handsome, with blond hair and a mustache. A ladies' man, Curly Jim. A gambler, a road agent. Will wondered if Hauser and Curly Jim had a mental picture of Will Croft, as he had a mental picture of them.

He cramped a wheel in front of the mercantile and helped Martha down. They stood together on the boardwalk, and she smiled up at him and said, "Now is there anything you'd like? Anything at all you need, like socks or shaving soap?"

Will cleared his throat. "I reckon not, ma'am, but thanks just the same."

"Well, then, I expect you'll want to see the town. The store clerk'll load the wagon, so you won't need to be here. But try and be back here in about an hour. I'm sure I'll have all my shopping done by then."

Smiling cheerfully, she entered the store. Will lagged toward the saloon, then went on by to Marshal Mercer's office.

The marshal looked up gruffly. "I seen you drive in with Martha Reed. Didn't take you long, did it?"

Will explained what had happened. Then he asked if Mercer had seen anything of Hauser and Curly Jim. Mercer said no. What, he asked, would Will do if the two outlaws didn't show up?

"Wait and see, first," Will said. "But if they don't show in a couple of weeks, we'll have to hold the Kid on an open warrant while I make arrangements to extradite him."

"Don't seem right, somehow," Mercer said gruffly. "You'll not only ruin Johnny's life, but Judy's, not to mention the fact that Martha'll be hurt. If you got eyes, you must've seen by now how Johnny and Judy feel about each other. Why, it wouldn't have surprised anyone around here if they had got hitched by now."

Will shrugged impatiently. "The boy participated in five holdups that we know of, and Lord knows how many times he broke the law before that. You can't ignore something like that just because he seems to have turned over a new leaf. A man has got to pay for his crimes, if only for his own good. You know that as well as I do."

Will left after this, and had a drink at the saloon. When he returned to the mercantile, he found a clerk loading the wagon with spools of barbed wire and cartons of groceries. There was no sign of Martha Reed, but about fifteen minutes later she came along the street and joined Will.

She looked at him flatly and said, "If you're ready, we'll go."

After that she kept silent, sitting stiffly at the end of the seat. Will knew something was wrong long before she said in an abrupt voice, "What have you got to do with Johnny Carter?"

Will forced surprise to his face. "Huh? What do you mean?"

"Don't try to pull the wool over my eyes!" Martha Reed snapped. "You're no hungry puncher from the looks of you. willing to work for board and room. I knew yesterday that there was something fishy about you. Johnny knew it, too. He froze up when he saw you. And here we no sooner reach town but what you make a beeline for Marshal Mercer's office." She turned to face him, her eyes hard. "You're a lawman, and the reason you went to see Mercer is because you wanted to talk to him about Johnny. Isn't that true?"

THE nature of Will's work had forced him to lie so often, that by now it was second nature. This time, however, meeting the widow's demanding gaze, the glib lie did not come easily, and he felt his cheeks redden.

"Why, now, I did go to see the marshal, but the reason was personal. If you don't want to take my word for it, we'll just go back and ask him."

"I already asked him," Martha Reed said stiffly, "but the old fool wouldn't tell me anything."

"There you are," Will said. "And as for thinking that I'm a lawman—well, all I can say is you're barking up the wrong tree." This, at least, was partially true, he told himself.

Uncertainty moved across the widow's face. In a dull voice she said, "I wish I could believe you."

Will cleared his throat. "Is Johnny wanted by the law? Is that what's worrying you?"

"I wish I knew."

"Why, he seems like a nice enough fellow."

"He *is* nice!" she said fiercely. Then she sighed. "But he's hiding something. What, I don't know. But it's something that bothers him. I can tell because I lived seventeen years with a man who tried to hide things from me." She paused. "I don't know why I'm telling you this. If you lied to me about not being after Johnny, then you know all the answers anyway. And if you didn't lie, there's no reason why should be interested."

"Well, now, I wouldn't say that," Will answered uneasily. "I reckon you think a heap of Johnny, and it's only natural that you don't want to find out that he's been in some kind of trouble."

She sighed again. "I'm not sure but what I'd rather know than not know. I'm not thinking of myself, either. It's Johnny and Judy that I'm thinking of. They should've been married by now, but he just hasn't said the word. He's holding back, and that's another reason that makes me sure he's hiding something." She looked at Will and said for the second time, "I don't know why I'm telling you all this."

Will knew why. All that she had said had been bottled up in her for so long that she had to let it out. He took a dull breath, not comfortable. It came to him that he had never come up against a similar situation during all the years he had spent hunting outlaws, and that he hardly knew how to cope with it.

"Anyway, I'm sorry I spoke out against you," the widow said. "If I'd thought about it instead of going hog wild, I would've realized that if you were a lawman with a warrant for Johnny, you would've arrested him right away."

She lapsed into silence after this, a brooding expression on her pleasant face, but she forced a gay smile as they drove into the yard, and she joked and laughed as Johnny and Judy helped to unload the wagon. Will had to hand it to her. She might be worried about the Kid, but she would never let the two youngsters know it.

After dinner, Johnny told Will that he had a stack of fence posts ready, and that they would spend the afternoon stringing wire. They loaded up and drove off across the hills toward an escarpment, a long high cliff broken by little canyons that they would fence off to keep the cattle out. As they drove along, Johnny pointed out the lush gramma grass and wild oats along the bottoms, saying they would have to start haying right soon.

"Been thinking about it. I don't like to see Judy doing a man's work, so you got a steady job if you want it. Only thing, Mrs. Reed can't pay regular wages. Not until fall roundup, anyhow."

"We'll see how it goes," Will said.

He learned that Mercer had been right about one thing—Johnny was a bear for work. The Kid took over the tougher job of digging

post holes, and Will tamped dirt around the posts with a hoe handle and strung the wire.

Now and again he scanned their surroundings, wondering when and how Hauser and Curly Jim would strike. He guessed Hauser would be more apt to confront the Kid than to shoot him from ambush. For after riding some six hundred odd miles to do the job, the outlaw would want the satisfaction of telling the Kid off before he started shooting.

AFTER a week passed without a sign of the outlaws, Will found himself getting edgy. And more. For the first time as a man hunter, he had the feeling that he was personally involved. He fought it, but he couldn't shake it off. The trouble was, he had a sense of being at home in the Broken Bit ranch house. It had started the evening they played fan-tan. Martha had broken out a deck of cards, she had served coffee and cake, and they had enjoyed themselves thoroughly.

They had played every evening since then, and more than once Will found himself forgetting why he was at Broken Bit in the first place. Then, all of a sudden, it would hit him, and he would squirm with a deep sense of guilt.

And more. Despite the hollow echo of his own inner laughter, he found himself taking an interest in the ranch. Johnny had worked wonders during the two years he had spent here, but Will realized before the week was out that there was still room for improvement. The widow controlled ample grass and water, but her herds were skimpy and needed to be culled, and better stock introduced. Will thought often of all he could do if he was given a free hand.

Then there was Martha herself. She had turned cheerful, and would laugh and joke with Will as if they had known each other for years. And Will could not deny the fact that he thought a lot of her, thought more of her than he had of any other woman during his forty years as a bachelor. He looked forward to the inevitable end of their relationship with something close to fear, knowing that the core of his being had been touched, and that his life would never again be the same. Nor Martha's, as well as Johnny's and Judy's lives, he told himself. He wondered how he could ever face them when the time came to take Johnny away.

Something unpleasant happened before that, and it shook Will.

He and Johnny had finished stringing wire, and on this day—a hot, windless day—they hauled salt blocks out to the far corners of the range. On the way back, they passed Broken Bit's largest water hole. It was the size of a small pond, and deep enough to swim a few strokes. They stopped to let their horses drink, and then Johnny swung down. He said, "I don't know about you, Henry, but I'm taking me a dip and washing the dust off."

A few minutes later, he was splashing happily in the clear water that came from an underground spring. It all looked so inviting, that Will joined him.

The water cool against his skin, Will scrubbed himself with handfuls of gritty sand. Johnny ducked his head for the last time and waded in to shore, blowing like a horse that had drunk its fill. He was saying something about renting a mower and hiring an extra man to help with the haying, when suddenly he paused. Will, who was sitting neck deep in water, turned his head. Johnny was crouched over their piled clothing, his face pale with shock. All of a sudden he pulled the belt from Will's trousers, and the light flashed dully on the badge pinned to its inner side.

"No," Johnny groaned. Then anger rippled across his face and he reached for his holstered gun. "You skunk!" he said harshly. "You mean, low-down, dirty skunk!"

Will rose and started toward him.

"Keep back, you miserable low-life," Johnny said. He shook the belt. "A special deputy come to arrest Johnny Kid. Coming here like you did, living with us, eating at our table —"

"Put that gun away!" Will told him curtly. He kept walking toward Johnny with a sort of grim and final purpose. "Put that gun away!"

Johnny took a step back. "Eating at our table," he repeated. "What kind of man are you?" He paused. "Just who in the hell are you, anyway?"

"Will Croft."

The Kid's eyes widened. "I've heard of you. Why didn't you pick me up right away?"

"If you stop and think, you might know I had a reason," Will said, and saw uncertainty cross the Kid's face. "Now either use that gun or put it away."

Johnny groaned. He threw the gun down. "What reason?"

"Hauser and Curly Jim are out to get you. I've been expecting them any day."

The Kid stared at Will. "I don't believe it! Hauser's got no reason to come after me."

"That's what you think," Will said. "Now let's get dressed, while I tell you about it."

Johnny listened in shocked silence. "So they think I double-crossed the gang," he said finally. And then, "Well it's not true! I was sick of the whole business and wanted out. I meant to tell Hauser and make a clean break. So one evening I went to see him at Clear Creek, where he used to call on some dance-hall woman."

"Brazil?"

"That's her! Anyhow, I hailed the cabin, and somebody ran out the back. Then Brazil came to the door. I asked for Hauser and she said she didn't know where he was at. So I went back to the hideout, and heard shooting just before I got there. Didn't know it at the time, but that must've been when the posse closed in on those boys. That fellow Tobin that I ran across here in town told me about it. Anyhow, I headed south and ended up here. That's the straight of it, so help me."

Will nodded. "Where were Hauser and Curly Jim that evening, do you suppose?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Johnny said. "What worries me, is what happens now. Are you taking me in?"

"I have to, and you know it."

Johnny groaned. "Then let's go right on through to town. I can't stand the thought of facing Judy and her ma."

"Listen, they're not gonna turn their backs on you, Kid. So don't you think it's better all around if you face 'em at the ranch and get it over with?"

Johnny took a long breath. "I reckon you're right."

THEY rode back in silence. Will steeled himself as they turned into the yard, dreading the next few minutes. He looked for Judy to run outside, the way she always did when they came in off of the range. But there wasn't a sound as they left their horses at the corral fence and crossed toward the house. The thought that something was wrong flashed across Will's mind, and at almost that same moment a big, blocky, bearded man stepped from around the corner of the house, a rifle at his hip. He said softly, "Howdy, Kid. Remember me?"

Will knew it was Hauser. Just then the door opened and Curly Jim stepped outside, gun in hand. He glanced quickly at Johnny, his mouth working, a tall, slender man in a rumpled but expensive suit. "Get their guns," Hauser told him.

Curly Jim stepped around behind them and lifted Will's gun. Will didn't move a muscle, feeling the pressure of Johnny's gun against his belly, for he had pushed the weapon inside the waistband of his trousers, only the butt showing. Curly Jim proded Johnny in the back.

"Where's your iron?" Curly Jim asked nervously.

"I'm not packing one," Johnny said. And then, in a sharper tone, "Where's Judy and her ma? What've you done with 'em?"

"We didn't hurt 'em, so don't worry about it," Hauser said. He chuckled grimly. "You ain't got much time left for worrying, anyhow." He looked at Will, and his gaze narrowed. "Does this hombre look familiar to you, Curly?"

Curly Jim had returned to his place by the door. He gave Will a sharp glance, shook his head, and then said, "Shoot him and get it over with. We got to get out of here."

"Don't get impatient," Hauser said, still looking at Will. Then all of a sudden he grinned. "By gosh, it's Will Croft! Damned if it ain't! Came to pick the Kid up, did you? Now if that ain't rich."

"You guessed right," Will drawled. "But you guessed wrong about Johnny."

Hauser scowled. "He's the only one that couldn've double-crossed us."

"You're wrong," Johnny said. "I went to Brazil's place to see you that evening, and—"

Curly Jim said hoarsely, "Dammit, Hugh, shoot him!" He lined his gun on Johnny. "Either you do it, or I'll put daylight through him."

Hauser didn't answer. Will watched Curly Jim. He took in the fine suit, the brocaded vest, the silk shirt and the low-heeled, knee-length riding boots, the kind a man rarely wore in this country. Curly Jim's handsome face was taut with some inner strain, and suddenly the reason clicked in Will's mind.

"How'd you find things in San Francisco Curly?" Will asked.

Curly Jim paled. "What're you talking about?"

Bull's eye, Will thought. Close to it, anyhow.

Hauser looked at Curly. "What's this?" he growled.

Will said, "Brazil went to Frisco directly after we rounded up your gang. Ain't that so, Curly?"

Now Curly Jim's face was white. "How the hell would I know?"

"You damn well do know," Will said. And then, "Johnny, tell Hauser what happened the night you went to look for him at Brazil's cabin. Tell him who it was you saw running out the back door."

"It was Curly," Johnny answered promptly.

Curly shouted that it was a lie, but Hauser told him to shut up. He said to Will, "What else do you know?"

"Plenty," Will said. "In the first place, let's take it back to that gold bullion you boys stole. You just don't take gold bricks to the nearest bank and trade 'em for cash—you got to peddle them to a fence and take a loss on their true value. You likely kept that gold at the hideout while you made arrangements to peddle it. Isn't that about right?"

Hauser grunted. "Go on."

"You would've got forty, maybe forty-five thousand in cash, and you'd have had to split it with seven men. Instead, Curly got ten thousand for double-crossing you, and then he followed Brazil to San Francisco where they lived high on the hog."

Eyes blazing, Hauser swung his rifle on Curly Jim. "You told me you were in Montana," he said hoarsely.

"I was!" Curly half screamed the words. But guilt showed nakedly on his face. "Listen —" he began, and brought his gun to bear on Hauser.

Hauser fired and the bullet caught Curly in the chest. As his knees buckled, Hauser swung back to Will, who was pulling Johnny's gun from his waistband. But the hammer caught in his shirt. He hadn't a chance, and he knew it. And then Johnny flung himself at Hauser, just as the outlaw fired. It threw Hauser's aim off, and Will had his gun clear before the other could fire a second time. Then Will squeezed the trigger and Hauser lurched forward and Johnny tore the rifle from his hands as he fell. . . .

They found Martha and Judy tied up in the bedroom. Judy told them how Hauser and Curly Jim had come there, and then she cried horribly. Johnny watched her.

Then Will took charge. He told them everything from the beginning. Martha watched him coldly. When he finished, she turned to Johnny and said, "We're not holding it against you, Johnny. I guess I knew all along that you'd been in trouble. But what you've done for us here, more than makes up for it as far as Judy and I are concerned."

Judy agreed tearfully, and Johnny brightened. Martha looked at Will. "Now I suppose you'll take him back to Colorado."

Will stared at the floor. He knew he could fix it, knew he could state in his report that the Johnny Carter who worked for Broken Bit was not the Johnny Kid who had been a member of Hauser's gang. And why shouldn't he? Johnny Carter had gone straight, he had saved Will's life. But he had broken the law.

Will looked up. But Johnny spoke.

"I'm gonna go back and face the music."

Will took a deep breath and grinned. "You do that, Johnny. And by the time they read my report on what happened here, they'll turn you loose. Even if the court does sentence you, you can bet it'll be a short sentence."

Martha Reed said, "You mean you're not going with him?"

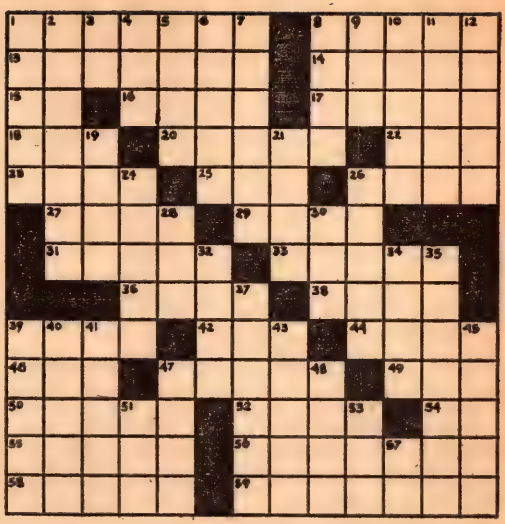
"That's exactly what I mean." Will unpinned the badge from his belt and handed it to Johnny. "When you get to Denver and see Sam Bruner, give him this."

"Well," Martha Reed said, smiling.

"Tell him I got a ranch to run." Will grinned. "And that I'm mighty sure I found that plump widow I've been looking for."

Martha put her head back and laughed, and then Will knew he had really found her.

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle appears on page 97.

ACROSS

1 Roy Roger's horse
8 Roy Roger's home
13 Italian food
14 Western state
15 Not out
16 To require
17 To cut apart
18 Poultry product
20 Part of a drama
22 Donkey
23 Unable to hear
25 Three (prefix)
26 Otherwise
27 To irritate (colloq:)
29 Cowboy's boot attachment
31 Rancher's animal

33 Vaporized water
36 Opening for coins
38 Unbleached
39 Leftover meat dish
42 Young dog
44 Examination
46 Large deer
47 Danger
49 Devoured
50 Lariat
52 Brad or spike
54 Article
55 To hinder
56 The original Westerners
58 To move furtively
59 Mailing charge

DOWN

1 Attempted
2 Texas mounted police
3 4 (Roman number)
4 Cocktail liquor
5 Departs
6 To choose by vote
7 "— of the Purple Sage"
8 To go upward
9 Lemon drink
10 Of the Navy
11 Game of skill
12 Palomino
19 Manner of walking
21 Small bites
24 Meat
26 Upright
28 Snakelike fish
30 Indian of Utah
32 Lariat
34 Open surface
35 Half-wild horse
37 Root vegetable
39 Groups of cattle
40 Foreigner
41 To glide on ice
43 Liberace's instrument
45 Verb form
47 Recreation area
48 Pot covers
51 England's beverage
53 Illuminated
57 Anti-aircraft (abbr.)

EASY MONEY

By ROBERT E. TREVATHAN

THE DECK SEEMED to be stacked against Johnny Ritter . . .

nothing he did turned out right, even falling in love

EVENTS were already out of hand when Johnny Ritter met Norma Allen. Had Johnny met the girl earlier, under a different set of circumstances, things might have gone smoother. But everything got off to a bad start, beginning even before Fred Niler and Murl Keef rode along.

Squatting near his morning campfire, Johnny caught sight of the two familiar riders when they topped a rise to the north. Ordinarily Johnny wouldn't have bothered to give either the time of day. But right now reputations didn't matter.

He got off his heels and tossed away the dregs of his second cup of coffee, a tall man with straight black hair and rope-calloused hands. Watching the two hard-faced riders approach, bitterness grew into being in Johnny's sun-squinted blue eyes.

Fred Niler and Murl Keef came up and dismounted, not waiting for an invitation. Johnny had known the pair for years, though

She bound Johnny's leg tightly with a clean handkerchief

he had never ridden with them, or cared to.

"Thought you were trailing upstate with a bunch of cattle," Niler said, his pale eyes curious.

Johnny knuckled one hand over his empty tin cup, grimness forming about the corners of his mouth. "That's a dream," he said flatly.

Niler exchanged a short glance with Murl Keef, who turned his beefy face and spat into the dying coals of the campfire. When Johnny didn't continue, Niler said, "We didn't expect to run across you here, thirty miles from your stomping grounds. It was less'n a month ago that you headed out."

"Maybe Injuns made off with his herd," Keef put in, his grin sardonic.

"I didn't get the herd into the Nations," Johnny said, a raw edge of defeat in his voice. "I didn't even reach the Brazos."

Johnny then told the pair what had happened to the five hundred steers he'd taken up the trail. He told them of that fateful night when he and his four hands bedded the herd down near the South Bosque. That was the night the hailstorm struck, spooking the cattle to their feet in one mass of heaving backs and pounding, clacking hooves.

The herd had rushed into the blackness, balls of phosphorescent light rolling off the tips of their widespread horns. They couldn't be stopped. When they reached the brink of the ravine they poured over, piling up on one another forty feet below.

"We had to shoot the steers that weren't already dead," Johnny went on. "There was nothing left to do but pay off my hands and call it a day."

Fred Niler touched a match to a brown-paper cigarette, calculation in his pale eyes as he regarded Johnny's trail-worn clothes. "I'd say that took your last cent."

"It did," Johnny said.

Niler glanced at Murl Keef, who was squatting in his heels poking a stick in the fire. He winked at Keef, then asked Johnny, "What now? It takes a heap of work to get a herd started these days."

Johnny could vouch for that. It had taken three years to shape up those steers. The prospect of beginning anew wasn't a rosy picture, either. Alone in the world since he was sixteen, Johnny felt that he was right where he had started then, ten years ago.

"You have a pretty fast gun, Johnny," Niler murmured. "We could use another man."

Shock was a probing finger in Johnny's insides. Fred Niler had made similar offers, back when Johnny had started mavericking for himself. But this time the queasy feeling came to Johnny because he was actually considering the suggestion.

He was a man who had reached the end of his trail. Everything had ended when those steers stampeded into that ravine, smashing his hope of buying a place and building up a herd of shorthorn stock.

Staring wryly at Johnny, Murl Keef got to his feet and tossed his stick into the dying fire. "I don't know about you, mister," he said, slurring the word. "Seems as if I remember your turning us down once or twice before."

"Yeah," Niler said, "but things have changed, huh, Johnny?"

"Maybe," Johnny said, knowing that once a man stepped over the line it was hard to step back.

Murl Keef grinned, satisfied he had pegged Johnny right. "See, Fred?" he asked Niler. "Ritter here still thinks he's better'n we are. Maybe he's fast with that .44 Colt he wears, but he can't make up his mind. I don't trust him for the Fredricksburg job, mainly because he's got a yellow stripe down his back a yard wide."

WITHOUT thinking, Johnny moved in on Keef, connecting with a hard swinging blow to the man's beefy face. Johnny felt his fist crush into flesh under Keef's eye, and Keef went down. But he got up cursing, coming at Johnny with a murderous glint in his slate-colored eyes.

Johnny swung again, wildly. Keef ducked away and countered with a staggering jolt on the side of Johnny's face. Johnny tasted blood at the corner of his mouth, and suddenly Murl Keef seemed to embody a cold-hearted world set against him. His strong arms windmilling, Johnny rushed at Keef, driving the big man backward with sheer bull-like strength.

But his blows were wild, and Keef pumped short hammering punches to Johnny's body.

Nearly gagging from an impact to his Adam's apple, Johnny sucked in a swallow of air that sickened his stomach. But just then he managed to throw a hard left jab as Keef closed in. The blow was solid and Keef met it with his chin.

The man's head snapped back and, his knees buckling, he sank down. He was groggy for a moment, but he rallied quickly. Gasping for air, Johnny stood over him, waiting for him to get up. When Keef came to his knees, Johnny felt a strong hand squeeze his arm. He turned to face Fred Niler.

"That's enough, you two," Niler said tersely, satisfaction in his gaze. "You're in, Johnny. Anybody who has guts enough to jump Keef isn't scared, for sure. We stop the Fredricksburg stage ten days from now, on Friday."

Keef got up. The big man's face was ugly; swelling puffed up under his left eye. "I don't like it, Fred," he said. "Ritter's not to be trusted."

Niler made an impatient movement with his hand. "I'm still the ramrod," he said, "and I say we need another gun."

Keef spat, but saying nothing. Niler looked at Johnny, grinning. "Okay?"

"All right," Johnny said. "Where does the job take place?"

"Never mind that," Niler grunted. "There's a box canyon ten miles north with a deserted line shack at the upper end. Meet us there, Johnny, next Thursday. It'll be best if the three of us aren't seen together in the meantime."

Niler went over to his black horse. After he swung aboard, he reached a hand in his saddlebag and brought out a leather pouch. He tossed the pouch at Johnny's feet, the coins inside making a ringing clank on the ground.

"From the looks of things, you'll need it before ten days are up," Niler said in a businesslike manner. "Play it our way, Johnny, and there'll be plenty of easy money."

Keef, fingering the well-worn butt of his six-gun, strolled over to Johnny. "Don't try crossing us, mister," he warned. "Be sure you find your way to that shack, like Fred said. If you don't, I'll find you. And I won't be coming at you with fists next time."

When the two riders had gone, Johnny Ritter knelt down and picked up the leather pouch. He loosened the drawstring and poured the contents on the ground. Staring at the bright gold and silver mixture of coins, a sudden qualm welled up in Johnny's middle. There were over two hundred dollars here—outlaw money. And he had accepted it!

What he had done came with shocking realization. But then slowly grimness grew around Johnny's mouth. What was the difference what happened now? He had sweated for other men for ten years, at twenty-five and thirty dollars a month.

His savings had been invested in that bunch of steers. He had nursed them along for three years on rented land until a good market was at hand. Then one black night a hailstorm struck, and he had seen his whole stack of cards go tumbling down.

There was no justice in it, from any angle Johnny could see. Nobody was on his side; he was one against the world. But Fred Niler had shown him a way out. And he, Johnny Ritter, was going to take that easy money.

Scooping up the coins from the dust, Johnny dropped them back into the pouch and secured the drawstring. He went over to his blanket roll and put the pouch in a saddlebag with his clean clothing.

It was when he started for his claybank horse, on a picket rope thirty yards away, that he heard the sudden crashing sound in the thick brush. The noise grew nearer, and abruptly a wild hog, a long-bodied spotted animal with enormous tusks, rushed out of the brush in a dead run.

At the same instant came the crack of a rifle. Startled by the hog streaking past him, Johnny was spun half around before he realized he'd been shot.

He was sitting on the ground, feeling a numbing sensation high in the calf of his right leg, when the horse and rider burst through a gap in the brushy undergrowth. The horse wheeled aside, out of Johnny's path, cutting up a fog of dust.

Drawing rein, the rider dismounted and came over to Johnny, who, concerned with the extent of his wound, didn't even look up.

"You crazy fool!" Johnny said roughly. "Why don't you look where you're shooting?"

"Oh, I might have killed you!"

THE tone of the voice arrested Johnny's attention and he glanced up, into a pair of big brown eyes scarcely a foot from his own. She was wearing a man's hickory shirt and Levis, and Johnny absorbed her features in one quick appraisal. Her face, pale with the knowledge of what she'd just done, was delicately boned, with a few freckles spread over the bridge of her nose.

A wealth of brown hair was yellow ribboned at the nape of her neck. A fresh brush scratch lined one cheek. She still held the Winchester.

"How badly are you hurt?" she asked, her eyes wide and anxious.

"Put that cannon down and we'll see," Johnny said.

She laid the Winchester aside, looking on as Johnny dug a knife from his pocket. He leaned over awkwardly; pain was already beginning to replace the numb feeling in his leg. Wordlessly, she took the knife from him and began cutting his pant's leg away from the wound.

"Is chasing wild hogs a habit of yours?" Johnny asked. "I didn't expect to run into a gun-toting girl hereabouts."

"And I didn't expect to find anybody camping here," she answered. "You're on Circle A range, you know."

"No, I didn't know," he said.

"Yes. I'm Norma Allen, and my father is Jess Allen. He owns this range for miles around."

Johnny moved his leg a fraction. Stabbing pain shot up into his thigh. He grimaced, then said, "It's nice to know who shot me."

She bit her lip, then answered him in kind. "Welcome aboard, stranger. You have a name too, don't you?"

"It's Johnny —" He caught himself, remembering the money in the pouch. "Johnny Evans," he lied.

He didn't understand, himself, why he had not told her his real name. Maybe this was the first step taken by one who had stepped over that narrow line separating honesty and law-breaking, he thought. For a moment he nearly forgot about the ache in the calf of his leg.

Norma got a canteen from her saddle and bathed the wound with a clean handkerchief. The bullet had gone clean through the fleshy part of his leg, leaving an ugly, bleeding wound. She bound his leg tightly with a makeshift compress and finally stopped the bleeding.

"I'm sorry about the accident," she said.

"Yeah," he said. "It was just an accident."

And, Johnny thought bitterly, it was just an accident that he lost those steers; it was an accident that he ran into Fred Niler and Murl Keef when he did. There was no reason for things happening as they did. It seemed that the whole sequence of things was piling up against him.

There was something about this girl that made Johnny doubt that he really wanted easy money.

There was concern in those deep brown eyes; and this was a feeling that nobody had shown Johnny in many a year. It made him wonder what might have happened had he met her before he accepted Fred Niler's offer to ride with him and Keef.

But he couldn't backtrack. Stiffly, Johnny got to his feet, balancing his weight on his good leg. "I've got to be moving on," he said suddenly.

"You'll do no such thing, Johnny Evans," she said.

The name was a strange sound in his ears, but it was too late now to make it right. "I must," he said.

He took one tentative step, hopping, barely touching the ground with his right leg. Pain knifed into the back of his knee from his calf. He would have fallen had she not supported him. Her hands gripped his arm tightly, and he was surprised at the strength in her fingers.

"See?" she said. "You're going home with me. Mom will have your leg fixed up like new in no time."

Studying the determination in the girl's face, Johnny saw there was no use arguing. Besides, he couldn't go ten feet on his own. And the thought of seeing more of this girl was pleasurable.

Yet he was afraid, too, because he had no right to the thoughts that were going on in his mind.

Besides, she was no girl to get mixed up with a guy who had a rendezvous to keep with Fred Niler and Murl Keef.

JESS and Mary Allen, a genial, gray-haired couple with work-lined features, became sonally concerned the moment Norma told what had happened. "Those danged razorbacks!" Jess Allen exploded as he assisted Johnny off his horse. "They've ruined my corn patch far the last two-three years."

"Bring the young man into the spare bedroom," Mary Allen said, hurrying into the house.

They took Johnny in, put him to bed, and doctored his bullet wound. Mary fussed over him as if he were her own. Norma took care of his horse, got him clean clothes, and helped her mother to make him comfortable.

By the end of the week he was much better. The feverish heat in his wound that had kept him awake nights had abated, though soreness and stiffness still racked his leg.

Norma brought Johnny his meals, and more and more he found himself thinking of her. Since that first day, she had worn dresses about the house, Johnny noted, and her trim figure made his heart skip a beat every time she appeared in the doorway.

Had he met a girl like Norma Allen sometime before, under different circumstances, things would surely have been different. But he had taken the money from Fred Niler and promised the man that he would join in the stage robbery. And Murl Keef, a dangerous man with a gun, would see that Johnny kept his part of the bargain, or else.

Johnny knew that he had no right to draw anybody into his own mixed-up life—especially Norma Allen. He was alone in this, and he had to keep it that way; he had to work things out for himself, if there was any way they could be worked out satisfactorily.

He was sitting on the porch one day, his leg propped up on a chair, when Jess Allen drove up a buckboard from the barn lot. "How's it going?" Jess called out.

"Fine," Johnny said.

He had come to respect the Allen family, and they in turn trusted him completely. But they accepted him as Johnny Evans, a stranger even to Johnny himself. The ruse had gone too far now, though; Johnny couldn't find a way out of it.

Norma came up on her sorrel, smiling at him. The sun was fiery bright in her brown hair. He smiled back at her, a warm feeling in his chest.

"I'm going into Fredericksburg for some supplies," Jess said. "Do you need anything, Johnny?"

Automatically Johnny's hand went to his shirt pocket. He had been out of tobacco since before he ran across Niler and Keef. But he had no money on his person and, suddenly, he didn't want to touch that two hundred dollars in his saddlebag, out in the horse shed.

Once he dipped into that easy money, it would somehow make things final, he thought. His feelings were confused, and he had a wild impulse not to show up at that line shack at all. But if he didn't, Murl Keef would come looking for him, with Niler's blessings.

"No," Johnny said. "I don't need a thing."

Jess nodded and moved away in the buckboard, stopping to exchange a few words with his wife, who was working in the nearby garden. Abruptly, Norma swung down from her sorrel, facing Johnny.

"Is something the matter?" she asked, studying him curiously.

"Why no," Johnny said, surprised at her question. "Everything's fine."

"Then why didn't you ask Dad to bring you back some tobacco from town?"

"What?"

"I saw you reach for your makin's," Norma said.

He hesitated momentarily, then said, "I don't have the money."

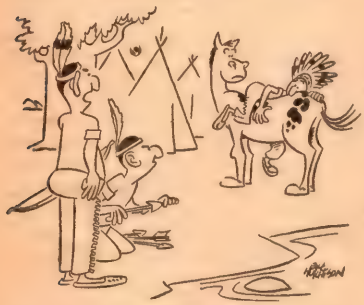
Her brown eyes suddenly grew cool, and he knew he'd said the wrong thing. "That day I got your clean clothes from your saddlebag," she stated levelly, "I happened to see that leather pouch. I didn't look, but I don't think it's filled with iron washers, Johnny Evans."

Stepping onto the porch, Norma swept past him and went into the house. Johnny knuckled his fists together, feeling the old bitterness. What was the difference, he thought; everything was against him. He had made his deal with Niler and Keef before Norma came along, and there just wasn't any way to get around it.

Slamming out the screen door, Norma went to her sorrel and rose to the saddle. She had the Winchester in her hand, and her face was

set. Reining around, she dug her heels into the animal's sides. Then she headed northward, toward the corn patch where the razorbacks were so bothersome.

Johnny Ritter watched her ride away, knowing that the dream-like spell he had slipped into since coming here was broken. He had not told Norma much of his past, though he had mentioned losing the herd of steers. She had sympathized with him, and seemed genuinely sorry for him. But Johnny Ritter, alias Johnny Evans, wasn't asking for sympathy.



"I can't understand how he got to be chief of this tribe."

He stood up, testing his bad leg. It supported his weight, but he knew he couldn't fully trust it. The leg felt stiff and tight from the ankle halfway to the thigh. But maybe it would hold up, he thought. Mary Allen had done a good job.

RESTLESSNESS came to him then, and he saw his claybank horse in the lot. All at once he missed the solid assurance of a creaking saddle under him, and he had to get away from the house. Easing himself to his feet, he went into the spare room and got his .44 Colt and his hat.

Ten minutes later, after saddling up with some difficulty, Johnny was on his way, riding northwest. Gradually, however, he veered to the east, in the direction of the Allen's corn patch that bordered a dry creek. He couldn't get Norma out of his mind. He wondered if he dared harbor even a small hope of ever straightening things out so he could let her know his true feelings.

But then, his feelings were scrambled, so how could he expect to explain himself to her? At first Norma had accepted him for what she thought him to be: an aboveboard cowhand who happened to get in the way of her bullet. Now it was different. She knew him to be a liar.

He reined the claybank up a brushy ridge, sitting a little sideways to east the slight pain in his healing leg wound. Then, from somewhere up ahead, the day's stillness was broken by the report of a Winchester. Johnny straightened up in the saddle and pushed his horse into a lope, guessing that Norma had had some luck in locating her quarry.

Topping the rise, Johnny realized at once what was happening. The corn patch was thirty yards away, and Norma's sorrel was racing down one side of it. An onrushing, popping thrust of movement among the cornstalks directly ahead of Johnny apprised him of the presence of the wild hog. Norma had circled around behind the razorback and was now trying to head it off.

At that moment the hog burst through the edge of the corn, a huge, long-legged boar whose tusks curved savagely upward from its narrow snout. Sighting more trouble in front of him, the boar spun and whirled hard right, with dust raveling up under its sharp hoofs. Johnny's horse reared high, shying away from it.

Instinctively, Johnny squeezed leather with his legs. A keen stab of pain shot up his wounded leg as he clung on the excited claybank. But he hung on, and partially brought the claybank under control as Norma turned and rushed after the fast-running boar.

She gave Johnny a quick glance as she went by. Her face was set, and he glimpsed the fierce determination in her brown eyes. She was after that destructive boar with a vengeance, and nothing could stop her.

Johnny weathered a final bucking jump from his mount, then took out after her. But the claybank was still reluctant to follow, and Norma drew ahead through the thick underbrush. A moment later Johnny heard a high-pitched squeal, then neighing of a horse.

Forcing the claybank through a tangle of briars, Johnny came to the edge of a small clearing. The wild boar had been crowded up against a pole fence and, cornered, it had turned on Norma's sorrel. Johnny's own mount planted its hoofs in the ground, the muscles in its shoulders trembling.

The Winchester lay on the ground to one side, and Norma was fighting to stay aboard her frenzied horse. Drawing his .44 Colt, Johnny dismounted as the boar rushed under the sorrel, gnashing at its legs with wicked thrusts.

Johnny hobbled forward, unmindful of the hurt that jolted his bad leg. Closing the distance, he fired at the boar, as the sorrel reared back and upward. The slug hit the boar with a dull thunk, in the shoulder. But the slug didn't stop its charge. The long tusks slashed the underside of the sorrel's hind leg.

The horse twisted and fell, throwing Norma clear. Johnny stumbled up to her and flung his body over hers as the horse gained its feet and whirled to safety. Then the boar, ten feet away, turned toward the pair on the ground. Blood was running down its shoulder as it trotted forward, its tusks poised at ready.

Johnny looked the boar square in its tiny eyes while he carefully aimed and began squeezing the Colt's trigger. He fired three times at pointblank range, and each shot thunked home. But still the boar came on, doggedly.

Johnny placed his remaining slug where the others had gone, between the tiny eyes. The boar's long legs began to buckle. When it finally went down, it was scarely four feet away.

Norma was sobbing, clinging to Johnny with all her strength. Johnny dropped his gun and held her close, her dust-smeared face buried against his chest. When they got up from the ground, Johnny looked into her brown eyes searchingly.

Tears mingled with dust stood out on her freckled face. But Johnny Ritter knew she was the most beautiful thing that had ever happened to him. And, in her eyes, something true and deep shone out for him.

"I shouldn't have come alone," she murmured.

But you knew the danger you could run into, Johnny thought, and yet you came anyway. He reached a decision of his own at that moment. He knew what he had to do about that two hundred dollars in his saddlebag.

IT WASN'T easy, sweating out time till Thursday, the day of the rendezvous. Mary Allen insisted that Johnny go back to bed, for during the encounter with the boar his wound had opened and fever had set in again. So Johnny lay there, waiting restlessly for the hours to pass.

Then, finally, on Thursday morning, before the others were up, he stole out of the house and limped to the horse lot. It was a two-hour ride to the box canyon that Fred Niler had described. Twice Johnny was forced to stop to rest his throbbing leg. When he at last sighted the tumbledown line shack, the sun was a ball of fire on the canyon rim.

The cabin itself was half hidden by a motte of blackjack oak, jammed up against the face of a brushy cliff. Two familiar horses were in the pole corral to one side, and Johnny felt that his arrival was expected. Coming into the yard, he took the pouch of coins from his saddlebag and dismounted.

Soundlessly, Murl Keef appeared at a corner of the shack. His beefy face held a sardonic grin, his slate-colored eyes were venomous. Johnny noted that the gunman's cheek was still puffy from their fight, days ago.

"Well," said Fred Niler, stepping from the shack, "I see you made it, Johnny."

"I still don't like it, Fred," Keef snapped, his big hand near his gun butt. "He's not our kind, and never will be. I don't trust him."

Niler shot a quick glance at Johnny, his pale eyes probing. "How about that, Johnny?" he asked. "Is Keef right?"

Johnny shifted his weight, easing the sudden strain on his bad leg. Sweat welled up beneath his hat band. Abruptly, he tossed the leather pouch of coins on the ground at Niler's feet.

"It's all there," he said levelly. "I want no part of any stage holdup."

There was a strained silence. Niler and Keef exchanged perceptive glances. The faint notes of a mocking bird came from a distant tree. Johnny felt big and awkward, like some giant actor on a postage-stamp stage.

Keef's burst of laughter was sharp, menacing. "Sure," he said, mockery in his voice, "you just pile on your horse and forget you ever saw us—forget you know anything about the Fredricksburg holdup."

Johnny looked at Niler, realizing how foolish he had been to think that the two men would let him get off with this play. But he *was* here, and he knew he couldn't have done it any other way. He just wasn't out for easy money—not after meeting a girl like Norma Allen.

Niler said, "Well, Johnny, why don't you ride?"

"I wouldn't get far," Johnny said. "Nobody does, with a bullet in his back."

"That's an insult," Keef said derisively. As he spoke his hand became a blur of practiced motion as he cleared leather with his sixgun.

Johnny began his own draw. But the strain on his wounded leg was at a breaking point, and it caved under as he went into action. This unexpected movement saved Johnny's life. For he was falling away from Keef's line of fire, and the big man's snap shot only grazed his side as he went down.

Johnny then squeezed his Colt's trigger, awkwardly and from a poor angle, but with a steady hand. The slug caught Keef in the chest. Keef dropped his weapon and crumpled lifeless. Johnny rolled on the ground, fighting dust from his eyes as he sought Fred Niler.

The outlaw stood there, deliberately aiming a shot at Johnny's twisting body. Johnny knew instinctively that he'd never get his Colt swung around in time to save himself.

Then an explosive crack ripped the air—the crack of a Winchester. Niler's face wrinkled with shocked surprise, and his sixgun slid from his grasp. A cry tore from his throat as he looked down at his right arm, which dangled, broken at the elbow.

Hearing running movement, Johnny got to his knees and jerked around. Norma and Jess Allen were coming up from the nearby blackjack motte. Jess carried the smoking Winchester in his hand.

Afterward, when Jess was delivering Niler to the sheriff and Johnny and Norma were on their way to the house, Johnny told her about his agreement with the two outlaws.

"And there's something else," Johnny said. "My name's Ritter, not Evans."

Norma smiled at him, approval in her brown eyes. "I had a feeling you were in some sort of trouble over that money. But you needn't have faced those two men by yourself, Johnny."

"You went after that wild boar alone," he reminded her.

"But sometimes people need one another," she murmured.

He knew what she meant. And suddenly Johnny felt that making a new beginning would be the most wonderful thing in the world, because Norma's eyes told him he wouldn't be alone any more.

THE MAN FROM

The West was far different than the South, he discovered, but a man who

IN THE turbulent years after the Civil War, Ephraim Crane took his wife, Virginia, his four handsome daughters, Mary, Janet, Leda and Shirley, all his movable possessions and headed west. The war had left Georgia barren and razed and Yankee carpetbaggers made life there untenable for a proud man from a proud family. Ephraim had fought with Jackson and he had been with the battered Army of Northern Virginia right up to that bitter day at Appomattox. But he was not bitter about the Yankees. Ephraim was an educated man and he saw that the death of Mr. Lincoln was the final catastrophe that destroyed his chances in Georgia.

He therefore departed, but not without considerable regret, since the Cranes had been part and parcel of this red-dirt land for almost a hundred years. He took his family to Nebraska and settled along the banks of the sandy, bright Niobrara. The women made the crude cabin he put up into a home and a new way of life was established. It was new, but in a way it was the same. Ephraim did the work now where slaves had done it before, but that was all right, because it helped him forget the past. He was on the land and that was the same. New people were fast coming into the country, so that his daughters were able to find husbands.

Mary, Janet and Leda were all married to young farmers within a year after the Crane's took up their homestead. It was good and Ephraim's wife was happy with the thought of grandchildren. But she was worried about Shirley, the tall, blonde daughter. Shirley did not seek a farmer from the increasing numbers of young men that came calling at the Crane homestead. The other girls had been good workers, with no idle dreams, nor any great hopes—beyond a good man. In that, they were like their mother.

But Shirley was like Ephraim. He understood her best and loved her best, although he never let it show. He also felt sorry for Shirley. Remembering himself in his youth, he knew the terrible dreams she held, the wild hopes and ambitions. She read a lot and she felt a tremendous urge to live that could not be satisfied living a one room cabin and helping a man with the field work. She didn't think it could at any rate.

So, when Ephraim's wife nagged at him to push Shirley into an early marriage, saying that she was twenty-three and well on the way to being an old maid, Ephraim defended the girl. He smoked his pipe and watched Shirley's tall, womanly form as she moved about the yard in the last sunlight of a summer's day and he silently hoped that she would soon meet a man who would fit the picture she had made in her head.

The Cranes had settled on the north bank of the Niobrara, which was a mistake, they were told. They were on land claimed as cattle graze by T. C. Ballard, whose vast ranch sprawled all the way into Wyoming. It was unwritten law in this land that the settlers stayed south of the river.

But Ephraim knew that the land was open to homesteading and it was the land he liked best, so there he settled. His three daughters married and moved back across the river, but he stayed on, because he was a proud man. What he was doing was right and he intended to stay where he was. The law gave him the land and no man was going to make him move. He looked forward to a clash with the cattleman with no pleasure at all and hoped that it wouldn't happen, but he would not move.

GEORGIA

wasn't afraid to fight hopeless odds for his rights, was a man anywhere

By PHILIP MORGAN

He talked it over with Shirley and she agreed with him, but her temper fired up and she said that if Ballard tried to move them, she would shoot him. Ephraim smiled in his beard, a little sadly, thinking how very brave are the young who have never seen death. Ephraim did not believe in fighting, or in killing. They were done only when all else failed.

Ephraim was building a fence around the pasture below the barn on the day the two riders came up from the northwest. They rode tall and straight in the saddle and he knew at once that it was trouble. These were cowmen, he knew, from the way they rode. Ephraim put down his shovel and walked up to the yard to meet them. Shirley and his wife heard the oncoming horses and came from the cabin expectantly, since visitors were rare in this land and always welcome. But when they saw the two cowmen, they halted and drew together instinctively. The riders pulled rein in front of the women and one of them removed his wide-brimmed hat. They had been watching the women and had not seen Ephraim walking toward them. It gave him a chance to study them.

The older man would be T. C. Ballard. There was an indefinable air about him. The same air possessed by the generals Ephraim had seen during the war. They were proud, harsh men. Ballard was tall and beginning to be a little stooped. There was a breath to his shoulders and his arms were exceptionally long. His hair, where Ephraim could see it under his hat in back, was white. His features were finely chiselled, giving him a sharp profile, and his face was burned to a bright red by wind and sun. He wore range clothes that were badly worn and he carried a gun. The gun seemed as much a part of him as the hat he wore. A mark of the man lay in the fact that he refused to remove his hat in the women's presence.

THE other man was a T. C. Ballard thirty years before. He had the older man's straight, tall frame and the same fine features. His hair was dead black. But the overall effect of power and arrogance, so striking in the older man, was missing. His face was pleasant and he seemed uncomfortable sitting his horse in front of the women. Virginia was obviously frightened and Shirley comforted her mother with an arm around her shoulders. She showed the two men a cool reserve in which there was no hint of fear. Seeing this, Ephraim was proud of her.

He came around the horses of the two men and thought to himself that they were very careless. If he had wanted, he could have killed them both before they knew where he was. They both appeared startled at his sudden arrival, but the older man recovered quickly and dislike at having been surprised showed momentarily on his stern face. He covered up by hitting at Ephraim with his rough voice.

"I'm T. C. Ballard, nester. Maybe you've heard of me."

Ephraim answered in his soft voice. "I'm pleased to meet you, sir. This is my wife, Virginia, and my daughter, Shirley. Will you gentlemen dismount and join me in a glass of wine?" The invitation surprised both men and the young one cast a quick glance at his father.

"We are not here on a social call," Ballard said harshly. "You're on my land. I want you to get off. Move back across the river." It was a flat command from a man who was accustomed to being obeyed. It had not occurred to Ballard that Ephraim would not obey.

Before Ephraim could reply, Shirley moved. She walked out several paces and stood defiantly before the two men. Her voice was low, but it vibrated with emotion. In her anger, she was very lovely.

"This is not your land, Mr. Ballard," she said. "This land belongs to the people of the United States. The government gave us the right to homestead it. We are going to stay here and you have no right to tell us to move."

Ephraim was watching the younger Ballard as Shirley spoke, and he saw the instant admiration that lighted the young man's eyes. He smiled slightly.

"Now, Shirley, don't get excited," Ephraim said. "Mr. Ballard looks like a

reasonable man. We'll talk this matter over."

"There's nothing to talk about," Ballard said in the same hard voice. "Move, or we'll move you."

The pure arrogance of the man's tone angered Ephraim. He tried to answer softly and calmly, but he failed.

"Mr. Ballard, I don't like your tone," Ephraim said. He came up and stood beside Shirley and his blue eyes were cold. "You are on my land and I have tried to treat you as a guest should be treated. But I will not hear threats from any man here, or elsewhere. Kindly watch your tongue."

The young man's face blanched and his eyes shuttled quickly to his father. Ballard bent from the saddle, staring into the cold eyes of Ephraim Crane. His own gaze was burning with passion.

"This is my land. If I have to kill you to get you off, I'll do it."

Despair seized Ephraim then, for he saw no yielding in the man before him and knew there was none in himself. He saw the looks that were passing between young Ballard and his daughter and he had a feeling of futility. But a man did not change the ways of a lifetime and he had never backed down before another man. Therefore, he did what he had to do. He turned his back on them and went into the cabin. He took his belt and holster from the peg beside the door and buckled them on. He lifted the heavy Remington from the leather and checked the loads and caps and dropped the gun back into the holster. Then he went back outside.

Ephraim took his stand well to the left of the two women, who stared at him in mute terror. He placed his steady gaze on T. C. Ballard, seeing surprise widen the cattleman's eyes.

"Mr. Ballard, if there's to be trouble between us, let's get it done," he said, in a bleak voice. "Draw whenever you are ready."

That open challenge seemed to hang in the hot summer air for several seconds. No one moved and no one spoke, while each person accepted what had been said. Then Ballard turned slightly in the saddle and his right hand came off the horn and poised above his gun. Ephraim knew the man was going to draw and he knew that he would have to kill him. If the younger Ballard drew, he also would die. It was senseless, futile, but there was no other honorable thing he could do. He saw Ballard's face settle into stillness and tensed.

Right then, bare seconds before his father could move, the younger rider crowded his horse against his father's, blocking any draw. His voice cut at the older man.

"Dad, have you gone crazy? You can't shoot him down in cold blood."

T. C. Ballard gave his son one unbelieving, scornful glance and then said flatly, "Jed, move away. This man is armed and he has defied me. If you're afraid, ride out."

Jed Ballard's eyes narrowed at the words, but he did not move his horse away. He said, "I'm not afraid and you know it. It was a poor thing for you to say. We don't need this land. Let it go. It isn't worth killing over."

Shirley Crane now walked unhurriedly over and put herself between Ephraim and the Ballards.

"Step aside, daughter. If it has to be, let's get it over with," Ephraim said.

"Mr. Ballard," Shirley said in a crisp, firm voice, "get your father out of here."

"Yes, ma'am," Jed said. He looked at his father and the older man's return gaze was filled with scorn. "Come on, Dad. That's all there's going to be."

T. C. Ballard raised his right hand and placed it on the horn. He gave Ephraim one direct look and said, "This settles nothing. Because my son is a fool and an old woman, don't think I am. I'll see you again."

"Don't be a fool, Ballard," Ephraim said. "The boy's right. It isn't worth a killing. Let us get along in peace. I bear you no ill feelings."

"I will see you again," Ballard said relentlessly and wheeled his horse around. He raked the animal with his spurs and it lunged ahead. By the time he left the yard,

the horse was at a dead gallop. Jed allard held up a moment and then he reined his horse around and followed his father.

THERE was a strained silence in the yard after the cattlemen had gone. Shirley paced restlessly to the door, changed her mind and came back. She stood looking after the departing riders and her expression was very strange. Ephraim broke the silence finally.

"The young one, Jed, seemed all right. It's too bad."

Shirley answered too quickly. "He's no better than his father. And he's weak. He let his father walk all over him. If he was a man, he would have forced him to leave us alone. He knows it isn't right. I hate them both."

She looked beautiful at that moment and Ephraim's heart went out to her. She really didn't know what was happening to her, but he did. He had seen it in both their faces. She had finally met her man and Jed Ballard had met his woman. It sometimes happened like that and he had seen it happen here.

"Don't always put blame on people so quickly, Shirley," he said. "Everything isn't black and white and right and wrong. Ballard settled this land and held it against Indians and heat and drought. Now the government is taking it away from him and he's afraid. Fear lies back of this today. He sees a life's work getting away from him. I feel a little sorry for him."

She looked quickly at him and she was close to tears. "But a man can't claim the whole world. Jed should know it, even if his father doesn't."

"He knows it, but he can't easily go against his father anymore than you could go against me. If he did, he wouldn't be worth his salt. And you don't hate him." He added this last very softly.

She looked at him and her gaze was stricken. She stood very still for a moment and then she suddenly threw her hands over her face and ran into the cabin. His wife had watched all this and now came to lay her hand on Ephraim's arm.

She said in a tired voice, "Let's move back across the river, Ephraim. It isn't worth bloodshed."

He patted her shoulder affectionately. "It hasn't been easy for you, Virginia. You should have married a man who kept store and came home every night safe and sound and never got into trouble. It's what you wanted, but you got me. It isn't fair, but it's too late to change anything. I can't move across the river."

She spoke gravely, with a depth of wisdom she seldom exposed. "I wasn't just thinking of us. But if there's a fight and you kill him, Shirley will have lost her young man." She started for the cabin and then stopped and turned back, her face troubled. She said, "It wasn't true, what you said. If you had tended store, I would have liked it. If you had been anything at all, I would have married you. You're my man and there never was another and there never could be. It wasn't a nice thing to say."

Ephraim was pleased and surprised. He came to his wife and put his arms around her and kissed her.

"What I was trying to say was that you were too good for me." That brought out her smile and she broke away and went towards the cabin, satisfied. Ephraim walked slowly toward the pasture and the partly finished fence. . . .

They were eating supper just at dusk that evening when the sound of hoofbeats came across the land. Ephraim rose and took his rifle and stepped to the window. Jed Ballard was riding toward the cabin, coming fast. He reached the foot of the yard and reined in his mount and hailed the house.

"Hello in there. Can I come in?"

Ephraim stepped to the door and told him to come on. He saw Shirley's hurried touching at her hair, how she smoothed her plain dress. Jed Ballard rode up and swung from the saddle and came up, his young face set and grave. He shook hands solemnly with Ephraim and made his courtesies to Virginia, but his eyes were on Shirley. She regarded him coldly.

"We were just eating. Perhaps you would like to join us, Mr. Ballard,"

Ephraim said.

"Jed," the boy said and smiled for the first time. He had a warm smile that lightened his face and made him better looking. "I'd be much obliged. I haven't eaten since mornin' and was gettin' a little gaunt."

That gave them all something to do and was a welcome respite. The women set another place and Ephraim dragged up a chair. Jed sat down to a plate piled high and cleaned it in short order, eating fast, with the ever present appetite of youth. He finished and expressed an honest appreciation for the meal.

Then for awhile they talked of the little things important in their world, of the need for rain, of the growing influx of new settlers and the rumor that there was a new town soon to go up across the river. But Jed was sparring for time and they all sensed it and conversation soon lagged. Jed got up and took his hat and stood there, looking down and twisting his hat in his big hands.

Finally he cleared his throat and said, "It was a good meal and I sure want to thank you. I rode over to apologize for the way dad was. I'll do everything I can to see that he doesn't bother you. But I can't promise anything. He won't usually listen to me."

"Keep him away," Ephraim said. "I wouldn't want to fight him, but this is legally my land and I intend to keep it."

Jed nodded solemnly. "I'll do my best," he said and turned towards the door.

Shirley came around the table and took his arm.

She said, "I'll walk with you."

He looked down at her in surprise and pleasure and his smile came again.

"I'd be pleased, Miss Shirley."

They went out together, two handsome youngsters. Ephraim had the stark feeling that the fates were chuckling over them. They were meant for each other, yet everything was against them. He was still sitting at the table fifteen minutes later when Shirley came back into the house and set about cleaning up the table, helping her mother. As she worked, she was softly humming and there was a secret, pleased expression on her face.

THE DAYS immediately after were tense days for Ephraim. He expected T. C. Ballard to return and so he was never without the long-barrelled Remington. The cattleman did not come, but his son did. Jed usually arrived in the evening, sometimes for supper, but usually later. Then he and Shirley walked hand in hand along the bank of the river and occasionally stopped to talk.

Once Ephraim saw them embrace, straining against each other with all the terrible intensity of their youth. Within two weeks after the Ballards had first ridden into the yard, it was apparent that Jed and Shirley were in love. Both Ephraim and Virginia liked Jed and they approved, but they saw how near hopeless the situation was.

Ephraim began to hope as the days passed that T. C. Ballard was going to let him alone. But then he rose one morning to find the fences around his stacks of hay cut and Ballard's cattle feeding on the hay. Most of the stacks were knocked down and the cattle were fast trampling the hay into uselessness. Rage burned wildly in Ephraim at this senseless destruction and he took his rifle and went out. He deliberately and with distaste did what he felt had to be done. Saddling his horse, he chased the cattle several miles from the cabin. Then he shot thirty prime steers and rode home, sick at the waste of all that beef. But the thirty steers represented the approximate sale value of the hay. They didn't begin to account for his need of the hay, or of the work he had done in cutting and stacking it. This was a war and this was how they were fought. You hurt your enemy and he hurt you until one of you could take no more. It was a dirty game, but it was a game he knew too well.

Jed Ballard came that evening. He was troubled and worried. Ephraim waited for him to speak, knowing that what would follow would be tough on all of them. Jed rubbed a hand over his head and dug his

boot toe into the ground.

"A couple of our riders found the steers," he said. "Dad wanted to come over and shoot you up, but I talked him out of it. But he won't hold off long and it ruined our chances of getting him to agree to me and Shirley marryin'."

There was accusation in the boy's voice and Ephraim saw Shirley begin to bristle. He spoke before she could.

"He ruined my hay, Jed. I had to do something to hurt him, so he'll understand he can't run over me. My will is as strong as his. Because of you and Shirley, I wish things were different, but we have to accept them as they are, not as we wish they were. However, I will make one last try. I am going to ride over and speak to your father and tell him that you want to marry my daughter. Maybe that will change him."

Jed shook his head. "Nothing changes him. The killing of the cattle cinched it."

Shirley asked hotly, "Did he expect us to do nothing after what he did to us? Does he know how much work we put in on that hay?"

"I'm going anyhow," Ephraim said. "It's time he learned how things are between you two."

He started for the corral and then came back. He went inside and when he came back out, he had taken off the gun and belt. He strode to the corral, a tall and heavy-shaped man whose thick beard was just now beginning to show a little gray. He roped out his white-stockinged mare and saddled her with deliberately care and rose to the leather with an easy grace. The three people in front of the cabin made a stark picture and he gave them a reassuring wave. It was a reassurance that he needed himself.

The ride to Ballard's place was long and it was after ten when he rode onto the yard and pulled up before the wide veranda that ran the whole length of the house. He hailed the house and shortly a lamp came on. He heard men coming out of the bunkhouse behind him and held his hands on the saddle horn, knowing he was in danger. T. C. Ballard stepped onto the porch soon after, clad in a pair of pants that had been hastily pulled over his night shirt. When Ballard saw who his caller was, he swore in sudden anger.

Ephraim help up his hand and said, "I'm not armed, Ballard. I want to talk to you and in private."

"I have nothing to talk to you about, nester. Since you aren't armed, I can't shoot you down, but I will the next time we meet. I'm warning you now, so don't ever come off without a gun again."

"This is about Jed," Ephraim said.

Ballard didn't answer for a long time. Finally he jerked his head at the house.

"All right, get down and come in."

He turned back into the house, not waiting for Ephraim to dismount. It was a discourtesy that rankled, but Ephraim clenched his jaws and said nothing. He followed Ballard into the house and into a room that obviously served the rancher as an office. It was strewn with riding gear and guns and the paraphernalia of ranch life. Ballard indicated a leather chair, but Ephraim shook his head and remained standing. They faced each other across the littered floor, two big men, each with an iron will, each with a strict code of honor. Ephraim felt that there was no point in talking, but he at least had to try.

"Mr. Ballard, your son has been a regular caller at my home. He has been courting my eldest daughter, Shirley. They're in love and they want to marry. Therefore, I have come to see if we can settle our differences peaceably, for their sakes."

SHOCK was plain on Ballard's face. He shook his head in disbelief. "Do you mean to say my boy wants to marry some nester's barefoot girl? He must be crazy."

Rage hit Ephraim at the words and he started for Ballard. But he remembered his mission in time and held up.

He said coldly, "The Cranes of Georgia, sir, are as good as any family in this land. The boy made no mistake. I wouldn't call on you, because I consider you a greedy fool, but the boy deserves a break and so does my daughter. I was hoping to prevent the bloodshed that would mean

they could never marry. If you think anything of the boy, you'll give the matter consideration."

Ballard didn't hesitate in his answer. He said harshly, "This matter deserves no consideration. You shot thirty of my steers. Pay for them and get off my land and there will be no trouble. Stay and I'll kill you."

Ephraim felt very old at that moment. Violence seemed always to dog his steps. He said wearily, "All right, Mr. Ballard. But come alone; don't send your men. This is between us and we will settle it as gentlemen should."

Ballard said stiffly, "I will ride over in the morning. If you are still there, I will have no choice but to shoot you down." He turned abruptly and walked from the room, ending the talk.

Ephraim went out to his horse and mounted. He reined about and rode for home at a walk.

They were all tensely waiting for him when he returned, sitting silently around the table. Ephraim came in and sat down also and knew that his face told them.

"I talked to him. It didn't do any good. He's coming over here in the morning. If I'm still here, he will try to kill me." He saw despair hit all of them.

Shirley put her head down on the table and sobbed, that sound getting into Ephraim and shaking him up. Jed rose and walked around the table and put his hand on the girl's shoulder, trying to comfort her.

Shirley stopped crying after a bit and Jed said, "Come outside, Shirley."

She looked into his face for a moment and then rose and left the cabin with him. Ephraim got out his pipe and lit it carefully, avoiding his wife's eyes.

After the young couple had been gone several minutes, Virginia said, "It's a terrible thing to do to them, Ephraim. We could be across the river before he comes in the morning"

Ephraim nodded. "I know, but pride won't let me run. I know it's wrong, but it's the way I am. I can't change."

His wife studied his face for a few minutes, of a mind to speak further, but she saw that it was futile and didn't speak. After awhile, she got up and went into the next room and started getting ready for bed. Ephraim stayed at the table.

When his pipe was smoked out and he was about to follow his wife to bed, Ephraim heard the sound of horses in the yard. They were coming on briskly and he stood and put out the lamp in haste, angry at being caught dreaming. He moved quickly to the wall and grabbed down his rifle. Moving to the window, he peered cautiously out, expecting to see T. C. Ballard's riders in the yard. But then he let the rifle sag to his side.

It was his spring wagon and his bays pulling it. Jed Ballard was driving and Shirley sat close beside him on the seat. He wanted to call out to them, but something held him silent. There was a grimness, a determination in the very set of the young people's bodies that detered him. He watched them drive out of the yard and down the slope to the ford over the river. He pondered it awhile and got nowhere and finally went to bed.

Ephraim was wakened shortly before dawn by his wife. She was crying and hysterical. Shirley had not come back all night. Her bed had not been slept in. Fear stabbed through Ephraim and he jumped from bed and dressed hurriedly. He told Virginia about Jed and Shirley driving away late at night and she stopped crying, but she watched him with eyes that held no liking.

Finished dressing, Ephraim did not know what to do and paced restlessly back and forth the length of the cabin. He ate breakfast slowly, not tasting the food, his heart heavy at the loss of his favorite daughter. Because she was lost to him. It was plain what had happened. Shirley and Jed had seen the hopelessness of the situation, and not bearing to part, they had run away together. They would not be back. For the first time in his life, Ephraim was honestly ashamed of himself. He took a good look at himself and didn't like what he saw. He understood why Virginia could not meet his eyes.

Ephraim rose after breakfast and went outside. He didn't want to be with Virginia now, knowing how she felt. There was nothing to be done until T. C. Ballard came. So he took a last stroll across this land that he had come to love. He was giving it up. He was going across the river. It hadn't been done soon enough to save him his daughter, but at least he would do it.

T. C. Ballard was wrong, but he had been wrong too. Because Ballard was wrong, he had justified his own actions. They were honorable, in a sense, but what did it matter. In preparing his precious honor, he had been willing to sacrifice the happiness of the two young people, one his own blood and flesh. Now he was paying for his foolishness in a torment of soul that would never be less until Shirley came home and sat at his table with her husband as a daughter should.

Ephraim was in the barn repairing a stanchion, because he could never be long idle, when T. C. Ballard rode into the yard. The old cattleman looked as he had looked that first day, stern and arrogant. He was an unbending, iron-hard man who undoubtedly slept soundly at night, justified in all his decisions by his infallible belief in his superior judgment. Ephraim let him ride to the center of the yard and stop.

Ballard called, "Nester, come out of the house." Again Ephraim mentally commented on the man's carelessness. He walked out of the barn and Ballard heard the scuffle of his boots and swung around in the saddle, his hand striking down for his gun. When he saw that Ephraim was not armed, he stopped the draw.

"There's no need for the gun, Mr. Ballard," Ephraim said and he was smiling. "We are moving across the river today." Ballard watched him suspiciously for a minute, until he saw that Ephraim was telling the truth. A cold smile touched his lips then, a sardonic smile.

"That's good. I didn't want to kill you."

Ephraim said softly, "You won't believe this and it isn't important, but I'm not afraid of you."

"Why are you going then?" Ballard asked in an amused voice.

"Because pride was holding me here and that's wrong," Ephraim said.

He started for the cabin, skirting Ballard's horse and hoping the man would ride out. He didn't want Ballard in the yard, flaunting his victory. He was almost to the cabin when he heard a wagon splashing across the ford. He stopped and wheeled and saw them, Shirley and Jed, riding close together as they had been the night before, coming toward him. A great shout of joy burst from him and he strode swiftly down the hill to meet them, and tell them of his decision.

Reaching the wagon, Ephraim took the reins of the near horse and walked beside it back to the yard. He was smiling, despite the grim expressions of the young couple. As they came into the yard, a hint of uncertainty clouded T. C. Ballard's proud face. Ephraim stopped in front of Ballard, bringing the wagon to a halt.

Virginia came from the cabin and Shirley jumped down and ran to her and nestled in her arms. Both women were crying and trying to talk at the same time. Jed Ballard jumped down also, but he came to stand beside Ephraim, facing his father. Jed's expression was determined.

"Dad, the fight is over. You can't kill the father of my wife. Shirley and I were married last night. We drove across the river to the settlement and got the parson out of bed to do it."

It was a very strange and frightening thing to see. T. C. Ballard's arrogance left him and without it, he was not the same man. His shoulders sagged and he dropped his great head on his chest. It was a long time before he looked up.

In a voice heavy with pain, he asked, "You married her?"

"Yes, dad," Jed said and there was compassion in his voice. "I love her and she loves me. It was the only way. Otherwise either you or Ephraim would have been killed. We couldn't have married then."

The old man turned his head and spoke to Ephraim. "Then, of course, the land is yours," he said in his proud way.

(Continued on page 97)

Roy Bean—Ladies' Man

a fact feature

By

Helen Usherwood

THE unorthodox legal practices of Judge Roy Bean have received much attention from chroniclers. Yet his prowess as a ladies man showed an equal degree of cunning and perspicacity.

In the years before his self-appointment as the "Law West of the Pecos" the adventurous spirit of Roy Bean led him into many a scrape that would have made a more experienced man tremble.

Of his many romantic escapades one of the most colorful occurred during his stay in old San Gabriel, California. Here he established a place of business known as the "Headquarters Saloon." With this venture Roy Bean prospered, due to the easy-spending Army patronage. As he advanced financially he also advanced sartorially, and seemed to acquire a certain brash polish and a quaint flair for showmanship that appealed to the ladies.

As a pseudo-Spanish *caballero* he was a jaunty sight. Mounted on a sleek roan, immaculately attired in tight fitting black velvet trousers, silk shirt, broad brimmed sombrero, flowing neckerchief, he was a sight to capture the glances of soft-eyed señoritas. Even the roan complemented his master's vanity by prancing along with neck arched magnificently, the sun dancing off ornate saddle and silver conchos. Many aristocratic señoritas watched with fast-beating hearts as this handsome *caballero* rode by, doffing his expensive hat to acquaintances and exposing an immaculately groomed head of soft wavy hair. Aware of the smiling eyes meant for him, young Roy was in his glory.

Not so pleased, however, were the Spanish blades, who bitterly resented the intrusion of this *Americano* in the hearts of their ladies fair. This dislike was also felt by a tall, blond Frenchman, whose position as top man with the ladies had been shaken by this young upstart. Prior to this unseemly intrusion he had been the focus of all feminine eyes.

"Oui," he raged, slender hands flashing, "the women, they go crazy. We cannot be idle, my friends, while this scum makes fools of the señoritas!"

Proud of his horsemanship, the Frenchman made a ceremony of mounting and dismounting, and when riding his arms were held just so. He had earned quite a local reputation for his marksmanship in shooting from the saddle. This, on occasion, had created quite a favorable stir among the ladies.

He now felt called upon to challenge Roy to a shooting match to be conducted on horseback. Roy cunningly pretended to avoid the match until jeered into it by the Frenchman's friends.

"By grab," he finally agreed. "I accept your challenge, but I choose the targets."

"Why certainly," said the Frenchman.

"That's real kind of you, friend. Tell you what we'll do. I'll be your target, and you'll be mine."

The friends of the challenger groaned. The Frenchmen himself hadn't bargained for this, but with the crowd roaring approval he had to accept.

NEWS of the impending match spread far and wide. To the sheriff, who doubted that it would come off, it was something of a joke. However, if they went through with it this type of shindig would attract an enormous crowd and that meant more business for the merchants of the town so the lawman went along with it.

Sheriff Harathzy set down the rules. "You two will have to stay within a square in the street. Two sides will be roped off to keep the crowd back. Your shooting will have to be confined to the other two sides so as not to hit anyone. First one who puts lead in a spectator goes to the calaboose."

The event was awaited with great anticipation. Each contestant dressed in his most elegant fashion, as did the spectators. *Caballeros* and gayly dressed señoritas filled both sides of the arena.

The combatants took their places at opposite ends of the arena. The sheriff fired his gun and Roy and the Frenchman raced toward each other. Roy leaned low over the neck of the roan and headed straight for his opponent, guns out. The Frenchman plunged toward him, fingers nervously on his gun. Within ten yards he fired twice.

A slight smile played on Roy's lips and he gently spurred the roan. Within six yards of the other animal, Roy wheeled suddenly to the left. With a cold grin he raised his gun. The devil himself couldn't have shown more deliberation and coolness. The Frenchman's eyes bugged and his face went white as Roy fired, and he tumbled into the dust. He had completely underestimated the craftiness of his opponent. Roy had maneuvered him into a position where he would have to fire into the crowd and then calmly put a slug in his right arm.

Forgetting their training in primness and dignity the señoritas raised a lusty ovation and descended in force on the handsome *Americano*.

The wound in his arm healed but the gallant Frenchman's pride suffered irreparable damage.

However, out of victory defeat came to Roy; he ended up in the hoosegow. As the crowd dispersed and there was no more business to be had, the town's leading citizens began to feel that the dignity of their fair city had been outraged by this "foreign upstart." They suggested to the sheriff that Roy be arrested, to which the sheriff readily agreed—the Frenchman being a friend of his.

But if the male population chose to deal so loosely with the law, the feminine gender had ideas of their own on justice. Feeling that their hero had been dealt with unfairly, they set out to do something about it. On the second day of Roy's incarceration he was presented with a steaming platter of hot tamales, compliments of the indignant ladies. The oversized tamales were significantly at the bottom of the pile, and inside these were several sharp pointed knives.

As one of the first inmates of a jail constructed of a brand new material known as cement, Roy set about to test its indestructibility. After several hours he had managed to cut a hole in one wall large enough to squeeze through. He found his horse tied at the back of the jail, and attached to the saddle were a pistol and three days grub. Even the Frenchman would have known what to do with these.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 30)

1. Scouts, though they were also beaver trappers.
2. (1) Wapiti, (2) bison, (3) pronghorn, (4) peccary.
3. Chaps.
4. Cattle raising.
5. Wyoming.
6. The Donner party.
7. The one in New Mexico.
8. A man who traded with Comanches, usually a Spanish-American from New Mexico.
9. The giant redwood trees of California.
10. Arizona.

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Eddie held the thin body up before him as a shield

Boy With A Man's Gun

By BEN FRANK

• • •

It's not your fight, Eddie kept telling himself, yet somehow he couldn't ride off and leave the girl

EDDIE GRABER had been told to round up some calves and bring them in to John Miller's Box M corral. He was working at it, but not giving a damn about his job or the calves or John Miller or John Miller's fight with the neighboring Triangle over grass and water. Eddie Graber was two weeks past nineteen. He was big, raw-boned, red-headed. A kid filled with his own selfish bitterness and anger, plus a grim belief that someday he was going to kill a tinhorn by the name of Shore Jessen. And he was as completely devoid of love or loyalty to any person alive as a rattlesnake.

When he brought the calves up out of a ravine, the low sun hit him full in the face—a brown, craggy face that looked

ten years too old for him. He cursed one of the calves that tried to dodge past and stung its rump with a savage swing of his lariat. Then seeing a rider coming out of the west, he halted and tried to make out who he might be.

The calf got past him. To hell with it! What did he care? Then he recognized the rider as Les Thompson and felt a jolt of uneasy surprise. He hadn't seen Les Thompson for almost a year.

"Hi, Pal," Les said, a grin touching his thin mouth. He was a couple of years older than Eddie. A kid who'd been in and out of trouble and liked to brag about it.

Eddie nodded coolly. He didn't care to be called "Pal" by Les. He didn't particularly like Les. But to be honest about it, he didn't much like anyone, and nobody liked him, and it suited him fine that no one had any strings on him.

"Thought I'd never find you," Les said.

"Why would you want to find me, anyway?" Eddie asked.

"To tell you something you've been wanting to know for two years."

Eddie felt a sudden rush of blood to his head. There'd been just one thing he'd wanted to know for the past two years.

"I've been up north." Les went on. "Guess who I ran into."

"Shore Jessen!" Eddie said harshly.

"Running a poker table in a cross-trail town called Quint," Les said. "Thought you'd like to know."

"You thought right," Eddie said in a hard, flat voice.

"Good shooting!" Les said and rode on.

By then, the calves had scattered, but Eddie didn't notice. He was remembering his brother, Tom. Seven years older than he, a big, handsome, laughing-eyed man—the kind of a man a scrawny kid brother couldn't help but worship.

True, some folks said that Tom wasn't much good for anything except riding wild broncs and losing his money, playing poker. But Eddie's adoration was a blind thing, and Tom was all he'd had in the whole world. Until Tom had gotten into a last poker game with Shore Jessen. After that, Eddie had nothing left but his anger and hate.

Self-defense, they called it, and Jessen was set free. But Tom has been well liked, and the gambler had left Hastings in a hurry and had dropped from sight. For two years now, Eddie had been waiting, somehow knowing that sooner or later, he would get a lead to the man. And now, he had!

He laughed suddenly. But it wasn't the free and easy laugh of a nineteen-year-old boy. It had a harsh, inhuman sound to it that made the Box M pony shiver.

Swinging the horse around, Eddie rode for the Box M. All he had to do was pack his bedroll, switch his saddle to his own pony, and he'd be on his way to this town called Quint. The calves and John Miller's trouble and the rancher's need for a steady hand could all go to hell! Eddie Graber could curse and ride and look like a man. But he hadn't begun to be one, for he had no thought of responsibility to anyone or anything except his own wild, savage emotions.

ARRIVING at the pole corral, he swung to the ground and tore his saddle from the foaming horse. It wasn't until he flung the gate open that he saw John Miller's wife. She was dragging an old, seldom-used saddle from the barn. It was too heavy for her to carry, for she was a small, frail woman.

Eddie halted in surprise. He'd never seen her attempt to saddle a horse. She lifted her head and saw him, and at the same time, he saw the shine of tears on her thin face. He felt stunned. She was the kind of woman who hid her troubles and worries behind a cheerful smile. But now—

"Eddie!" she called. Then she put her hands to her face and sobbed.

For a minute, Eddie just stood there, staring. Then he stepped up to her and asked, "What's wrong, Mrs. Miller?"

"It's John," she answered. "He was riding Whitey, and the cinch strap broke. He fell under Whitey—and was hurt. Jeanie and I carried him into the house.

Then I sent Jeanie for the doctor."

Eddie knew Whitey had a mean streak in him, even if he was Miller's favorite horse. But he just couldn't quite imagine the man being hurt bad enough to make Mrs. Miller go to pieces like this. John Miller was a big, indestructible man, with a booming laugh you could hear for a mile.

"I was just going to meet Jeanie and the doctor," Mrs. Miller went on, "and tell them that—that John doesn't need a doctor now."

"You mean—"

"He died just a few minutes ago."

John Miller dead? Eddie couldn't adjust his thinking to it.

"Will you go meet them?" the woman asked. "There's no need for old Dr. Casey to make the long ride out here now."

"Sure," Eddie said.

Funny thing, he'd never noticed before how thin she was. Or the tired stoop to her shoulders. Or the gray in her hair.

"I'm sorry," he said awkwardly.

He caught his own pony, saddled him and rode toward Hastings. He was a good mile from the ranch before he again thought of himself and Shore Jessen. He shook his red head angrily.

"To hell with Jeanie and the doctor!" he exploded.

But he rode on along the trail, anyway.

He'd just come in sight of Hastings when he met them. They saw him galloping toward them and stopped at the bend in the trail to wait for him.

Get this business over with as quick as you can, he thought. Then pack and head for Quint!

He looked at Jeanie and seemed to see her for the first time. She was sixteen or seventeen — he'd never bothered to find out how old she was. She had dark hair and dark eyes, a slim, straight nose with a handful of freckles sprinkled over it. He figured she wouldn't weigh a hundred pounds with both hands full of rocks —but she was kind of pretty. And, he saw with some astonishment, she was closer to being a woman than a child. Then he remembered how much she loved her father and felt a little sick inside.

"Eddie," old Doc Casey asked, "have you brought us bad news?"

"Yes," Eddie said hollowly. "It seems—well, you can't help John now."

The old man sighed. "I was afraid of that when I first saw you."

Again Eddie glanced at the girl, expecting her to break down and bawl like a baby. She didn't. She sat very still in her saddle, staring out of wide eyes at him.

"I'm sorry, Jeanie," Doc said gruffly. She didn't seem to hear him.

"Take her home, Eddie," the old man said.

"Come on, Jeanie," Eddie said gently. Without a word, she rode beside him.

"I can't believe it," she said, finally breaking the silence. "Just a little while ago, Dad was teasing me about my freckles."

Then the tears ran out of her eyes and down her cheeks. Eddie had never seen her cry before. He tried to think of something to say, but couldn't. However, she didn't cry very long. Not on the outside, anyway.

"With daddy gone, Cliff Carter and his Triangle will take over," she said. "Carter was afraid of him, Eddie. Now he doesn't have anyone to be afraid of."

She was right, Eddie knew. Well, so what? It was nothing to him. Let Carter move in on the Box M water and grass—who cared?

After that, he rode a little in front of Jeanie so he wouldn't have to look at her. Or so she couldn't see his face. And all along, he knew he couldn't walk out on the Box M. He would have to stay until someone was found to take his place.

For the first time since Tom had been killed, Eddie Graber felt responsible to someone besides himself. He didn't understand it and he wouldn't admit it. But that's the way it was. It was the beginning of his growing into a man.

AT THE funeral, he sat with the family, listening to the preacher, his face hard, his eyes fixed on the floor.

What the hell am I doing here? he kept

asking himself angrily. I've got a man to kill, and if I don't hurry it up, he may be gone before I get the job done!

Once he glanced at Jeanie. She sat very still, her small hands lying loosely in her lap. Calloused, blistered from helping him do the ranch work. He felt his anger grow.

She was eighteen, he'd learned, not sixteen. Stronger than she looked. Never complained and—but now the funeral was over, and people were filing out.

He attended the burial, then they had the long drive back to the Box M. Funny how quiet it seemed there without John Miller's booming laugh.

Eddie put on his old work clothes and went out into the gathering darkness to do the chores. He felt trapped. Cursing angrily to himself, he poured grain into the feed boxes.

A sound made him turn. Jeanie came into the doorway, dressed in old overalls and a shirt. Her dark hair was bunched up under an old hat. She didn't ask him what she could do to help. She simply came on in and went to work.

"I don't know what we'd do without you, Eddie," she said presently.

He turned to look at her again. She was just a small, dark shape in the shadows, he couldn't see her face. He thought how much larger and stronger he was than she. Why, he could break her in two with his bare hands if he wanted to! And here she was, not afraid of him, trusting him. Suddenly he hated her and her mother and the Box M, because they were his responsibility.

"Well, you'll have to get along without me," he said harshly.

"What's wrong, Eddie?" she asked anxiously.

"I can't hang around here the rest of my life," he said and walked away from her.

Out in the open, he stood with his hands in his pockets, watching the stars brighten in the sky. He wished he'd never taken a job at the Box M. He wished Les Thompson had found him one day sooner. He clamped his fingers around the butt of the sixgun he carried. It had belonged to Tom. For two years, he'd been waiting to kill Shore Jessen with Tom's gun, and here he was, tied down to a woman, a girl and a ranch.

I'll pull out tomorrow! he promised himself.

He walked around the barn and saw Jeanie standing with her back against the pole corral, her head tipped toward the sky. She was watching the stars, too. Then he saw her pull a handkerchief from her pocket and wipe her face. He knew then that she was crying.

He backed quietly around the corner of the barn so she wouldn't know he'd seen her. He was suddenly frightened without knowing exactly why.

They can't keep me here, he said over and over to himself. But he didn't quite believe it.

IT WAS the next morning that he found John Miller's saddle under some loose hay in the driveway of the horse barn where it had been left since John Miller's death. Eddie started to hang it up on its peg. Then out of curiosity, he examined the broken cinch. The break had not occured at the buckle, he saw, but close to the saddle. Then he saw that the leather had been weakened by a knife slash.

Someone, he realized suddenly, had deliberately planned the accident. Someone who knew enough about John Miller to know that he rode an iron-shod horse that would go crazy and kick a man if he fell under his feet.

Too stunned by the discovery to think straight, Eddie hung up the saddle and went outside. There wasn't enough wind to turn the windmill, and Jeanie was pumping water into the big wooden tank. Suddenly he felt a great stir of anger. Somebody was going to pay for John Miller's death. And for the tears he'd seen on Mrs. Miller's face. And for those blisters on Jeanie's hands.

He strode to the pump and took hold of the handle. "I'll finish this," he said gruffly.

She watched him silently for a time. Then she said, "Mother and I were talking last night about finding another hand. Les Thompson is back in this part of the country. He stopped here the day dad was—killed. He wanted to see you."

"Oh," Eddie said. "I thought he found me by accident."

"No. I heard him ask where you were working. We might get him to take your place on the Box M."

"Sure," Eddie said. But he didn't like the idea. He remembered that Les wasn't much good. That he liked to brag about running brands and doing some rustling. He looked at Jeanie and knew that he didn't want to turn her over to Les.

"Maybe I'll stay," he said.

"But last night you said—"

"Forget what I said last night. I've decided to stay."

"Thanks, Eddie," she said, a lift coming to her voice. "Thanks a million!" She went running to the house to tell her mother.

After he'd filled the tank, he saddled his pony, and with the cinch of Miller's saddle looped about the saddle horn, headed for Hastings. He hadn't told Mrs. Miller or Jeanie about his discovery, because he didn't want to frighten them. Not until he'd talked it over with Sheriff Addison.

He had no idea what the sheriff would do or say. Addison was an old man who had stayed in his office a long time by playing both sides of every fence. Actually there was no way to prove when the strap had been cut—or by whom. But it was something the sheriff ought to know about and consider. And if Carter should learn that the sheriff suspected that John Miller's accident had been planned, he might hesitate to make any more moves against the Box M. Eddie was sure that Carter or one of his men had weakened the cinch by slicing part way through the leather on the inside where it would likely go unnoticed.

Coming to the short-cut trail to Hastings, he turned, even if it did cross a corner of the Triangle. Frowning, he wondered where and when a Triangle man had found a chance to get at Miller's saddle.

He was so busy with his thinking that he didn't see the three riders until it was too late to do anything about it. Cliff Carter rode in the lead, a beefy, red-faced man with buck teeth and a flat nose. Behind him came his foreman, Bro Tilson, a long bodied man with washed-out blue eyes. Beside Tilson rode Les Thompson.

Eddie's first thought was, once Les changed some Triangle brands, and now he's working for Carter! Then a tingle of fear ran into him. The riders were fanning out to box him in—and a rocky, bubbling stream cut off any hasty retreat he might try to make.

"Mighty surprised to hear you're still hanging around the Box M, Graber," Carter said in a hard, flat voice. "Thought after Les told you about Shore Jessen, you'd head north."

Eddie glanced from one grim face to the other. He knew it really didn't make any difference what he said, he was in for trouble. So he said nothing.

"Reckon you know you're on Triangle land," Carter went on. "You ought to be smart enough to know we won't stand for a Box M man to set foot on the Triangle."

Eddie let his hand fall away from the saddle horn.

"Don't touch your gun, Graber!" Tilson said sharply.

Turning his head, Eddie found himself staring into the muzzle of Tilson's gun. He glanced at Les Thompson. Les had a faint sneer on his face, and Eddie had a sudden notion that Les had lied to him about Shore Jessen. That the whole business was a scheme to get him to leave the Box M.

"Unbuckle your gun belt and drop it," Tilson said.

Carefully Eddie unstrapped his gun and let it fall into the weeds at the side of the trail.

"Get down off your horse!" Carter ordered.

Eddie slid to the ground. Carter and

Tilson swung down beside him.

"Eddie," Les said, stepping down, "you made a mistake by not going after Jessen."

Before Eddie could square around, Carter swung. His big fist smashed into Eddie's face like the blow of a heavy hammer. Eddie staggered back, fighting to keep his balance and to get his arms up. But Tilson was waiting for him. He pinned Eddie's arms behind his back, and Carter came in, slugging.

Pain exploded in Eddie's chest and face, and his legs turned to rubber. Tilson let go of him, and he sank to the ground, and someone began to boot him in the ribs. He rolled himself into a ball, but it didn't help.

"I'll be damned!" he heard Les Thompson exclaim just before he blacked out. "Here's the strap off John Miller's saddle!"

IT TOOK him a long time to come to. It was like fighting his way out of a great black swamp that kept trying to suck him back into its muddy depths. And he lay there quite a while, staring up at the wavering sky, trying to figure out the reason for the salty taste in his mouth and the pain in his body. Slowly, he remembered.

At last, he managed to shove up to a sitting position. Things turned black, but he gritted his teeth and hung on. Gradually, he began to see the things about him. The rocky trail. A few scrub pines. His horse eating grass a dozen rods away.

He remembered the stream at the bottom of the slope and wondered if he could crawl down to it and splash cold water over his pounding head. Then he discovered that the day was almost over and knew he'd been lying here a long time.

Presently he remembered where he'd dropped his gun and began to crawl toward the weeds where it had fallen. It took him a long time to get there and then he couldn't find the gun. He looked at his horse again and wondered how he could ever get into the saddle. Then he saw that the broken cinch was gone.

He was sitting with his back propped against a pine, too exhausted to move, when Jeanie came riding up over the slope. The next thing he knew she was on her knees beside him.

"Eddie!" she cried, her voice shaking with shock and fear. "Eddie, what's happened?"

He tried to grin, but his face was too swollen and stiff for that.

"Seems I made a mistake by cutting across Triangle land," he said. "What are you doing here?"

"You were gone so long I got worried and started looking for you," she answered.

"We're still on Triangle land," he said. "Maybe you can help me."

Somehow, with her help, he got into his saddle and managed to stay there. But riding made him too sick to think or talk. Afterwards, he didn't remember much about the endless ride to the Box M. Or about being put to bed. And it wasn't until the next day that he told Jeanie and Mrs. Miller what had happened to him out there on the trail. Even then he didn't tell them about the cinch strap or his suspicions. This was something that was now between him and the Carter outfit.

"I'm going to the sheriff, Eddie, and tell him what they did to you," Mrs. Miller said grimly.

"No," Eddie said. "In the first place, I was on Triangle land when they caught me. In the second place, they'll shift all the blame on me, one way or another. They might even claim they didn't do it."

He knew how it would be, all right. His word against the word of three men. And Mrs. Miller finally admitted he was right.

"But what are we going to do?" she asked. She was a frightened woman asking a man's advice. "Are we going to let the Triangle take over our best water and grass?"

"No, ma'am." Eddie was a man giving her a man's answer. "We're going to hang on and sit tight until Carter overplays his hand. Then we're going to fight!"

She smiled a little at that. "Somehow," she said, "you remind me of John."

IT WAS a week before the soreness and stiffness went out of Eddie Graber's long, lean body. A week in which he did more thinking than talking. And for the first time, he thought like a man, not like a wild, revengeful kid.

He remembered some things about Tom that he hadn't bothered to think about. Tom's never holding a job for very long at a time, hanging around saloons and dancehalls, changing some brands on a few calves now and then. He was likeable but not much good, that was Tom Graber if you appraised him honestly. And, Eddie had a sudden notion, the trouble between Tom and Shore Jessen was probably just as much Tom's fault as Shore's.

Also, now that Eddie knew that Les Thompson was working for the Triangle, he wondered if Les had cut the cinch strap the day he'd come asking for Eddie. If he had, he'd probably weakened the strap more than he'd intended. Likely he hadn't wanted the accident to happen so soon after his visit. And, no doubt, both Les and Cliff Carter had been glad to get hold of that strap and destroy it. But no matter how it was, the trouble between the two ranches was Eddie's trouble now.

So he stayed on at the Box M, doing the work of two men and waiting for Carter's next move. Because he'd lost Tom's gun, he borrowed John Miller's big .45 and carried it wherever he went. And when he was out on the range where Jeanie and Mrs. Miller couldn't hear the shooting, he learned all there was to know about the gun. The way it fit his hand. Its weight. The feel of its recoil. The exact amount of pressure it took to send a slug smashing into a target. When the payoff came, he intended to be ready for it.

But the payoff didn't come the way he thought it would. He expected to be cornered sometime out on the open range when he was alone. So when it did come, he wasn't looking for it.

It was hot and dusty that Saturday afternoon, with a strong wind out of the south. Eddie hadn't been to town since his beating, but now a trip had to be made for supplies, and he and Jeanie planned to go for a load of things. At the last minute, however, Jeanie decided not to go, for her mother wasn't feeling very well that day.

Eddie took the long road to town, for he wasn't going to get caught on Triangle land again. Although he didn't really expect trouble this far from the Triangle, he kept a sharp lookout. He saw no one on the lonely road and arrived at the sun-washed little town without incident.

There weren't any people on the street, it was too hot, too windy. He tied his team in the shade of a rattling cottonwood near the blacksmith shop. Whistling softly between his teeth—he wasn't worried now—he started around the back of the wagon. And there was Les Thompson, standing with his thin back against the windowless plank wall of the shop.

"Hello, Pal," Les said, grinning on one side of his mouth.

It was the first time they'd met since that day on the trail. Looking at Les's thin, ugly grin, Eddie remembered a lot of things about him that he didn't like. But most of all, he remembered the tears on Mrs. Miller's face and the blisters on Jeanie's small hands. Suddenly he wanted to take Les apart with his own two hands and scatter the pieces all over town.

"You should have left the Box M long ago," Les said.

"Maybe I would have," Eddie returned evenly, "if you hadn't cut John Miller's cinch so deep that it broke before I could get away from the Box M."

"Pretty hard to prove the strap was cut when you don't have it," Les said without any change of expression. "So I don't mind telling you I did cut it a little deeper than —"

A glint of sun on metal caught Eddie's eye. He had a sudden notion that a man with a gun squatted behind a clump of

weeds back of the blacksmith shop. His eyes whipped along the street. Another man stood in the alley between a vacant building and a high board fence. He couldn't see the man, but he could see the shadow of his hat against the fence. Eddie knew then the score.

Les had been sent here to goad him into a gunfight. But before he could lift his gun from the holster, either the men behind the weeds or the one in the alley would put a bullet through his heart. Les, of course, would have already fired a shot from his own gun—it wouldn't do for him to give himself up with an unfired weapon. Self-defense, Les would say, and the only witnesses would be the man in the weeds and the one in the alley. Sheriff Addison wouldn't quibble.

EDDIE sucked in a sharp breath. There was but one way out of this trap, and the odds were against him. But he didn't hesitate. He lunged at Les, and they went down in a tangle of arms and legs.

Eddie saw the man leap from behind the weeds. He was Bro Tilson. He had a gun in his hand, but he was afraid to shoot now that Eddie and Les were rolling over each other.

Eddie twisted to look the other way. Cliff Carter had stepped from the alley, and was moving along the front of the empty building like a lumbering bear.

Once over his stunned surprise, Les had come to life. He was afraid that Carter or Tilson might shoot and hit him instead of Eddie. Cursing, he fought like a cornered animal to free himself from Eddie's grip, and they rolled over and over and came up against the rear right wheel of the wagon.

Eddie heard Carter's boots thudding along the board walk. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw dust puffing up around Tilson's churning feet. Whatever he did to save himself, he had to do it now.

Again he felt the wheel of the wagon against his shoulders. Wrapping his fingers in Les's hair, he lifted him and slammed his head against the iron tire of the wheel. Les sighed deeply and went limp, and Eddie pulled his thin body up over him for a shield. Then bringing John Miller's .45 up, he squeezed off a shot, saw Bro Tilson stumble and fall.

Carter shouted hoarsely and fired. The wagon shuddered with the impact of the heavy slug. Somehow Eddie knew that Carter's next shot would plow through Les and on into him. Laying the .45 across Les's right shoulder, he triggered.

Carter halted as if he'd run into a stone wall. A look of surprise came over his red face, and the smoking sixgun slid from his hand. With a sharp cry, he fell.

Eddie stumbled to his feet and stood leaning against the wagon.

People crowded around, shouting and talking excitedly. Then Pat Tucker, the blacksmith, came up with a pail of water and doused it over Les Thompson.

Les opened his eyes, sat up and shook the water out of his hair.

"I didn't want to make trouble for John Miller," he said hoarsely. "Carter made me do it. He knew I'd changed some brands and he said if I didn't help him make trouble for the Box M, he'd turn me over to the sheriff. So I told Eddie he could find Shore Jessen at Quint, and thought he'd quit the Box M and leave Miller without a hand. I cut Miller's saddle cinch so's it'd break—but I didn't know he'd be killed."

"On your feet, Thompson," Sheriff Addison interrupted. "I'll get the rest of your story over at the jail."

That evening, darkness caught up with Eddie before he arrived at the Box M. But they had a light burning in a window for him. Jeanie came to help him unload.

"You're late, Eddie," she said.

"I know," he said.

"I was awfully worried about you."

"You were?"

They both reached for the same box at the same time, and their hands touched.

In that breathless moment, Eddie Graber knew for sure that he'd become a man. Tom and Shore Jessen belonged to the past. Jeanie belonged to the future. He reached out and drew her close.

FORT

of FURY

By STEUART EMERY

Mason knew Captain Reed and his lovely sister hated him, but they would all lose their scalps — unless his drastic gamble paid off

EVEN the slight motion of turning in saddle sent the throbbing ache of over-strained and exhausted muscles tearing through him. And he knew that the same pain racked the frame of every trooper in the patrol detail that plodded the sands behind him.

Bloodshot eyes stared over alkali-caked handkerchief masks from under the lowpulled brims of campaign hats. Swaying men and horses alike were coated thick, and thirst joined with fatigue to make the last miles to the fort intolerable. The corporal riding right on the leading file wore a clumsy bandage wrapped about his head where Apache lead had grazed, two privates rode with limp wounded men lashed on behind them.

It had been hours of solid chase that had ended with the stringy-maned killers cornered and turned into good Apaches. The proof of their killing fury sagged in the crimson-stained blanket strapped onto a horse, being taken back for decent burial because the body was

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that of a white woman who had been mercilessly done away with when the blue uniforms had closed in. The Apaches hadn't left enough of the three men beside the burned wagons to do more than scrape sand over them.

First Lieutenant Alvin Mason, at the head of a twenty-trooper patrol from Fort Williams, had gone out for a routine reconnaissance—and he had brought back the full-fledged Indian war he had predicted for this spring in Arizona.

Clawfist, the Apache raider, knew what it meant when a white woman was butchered. Torque, his sub-chief brother, knew it also.

Pulling a little to the side Mason could see the flat-angled face of the captured killer, Torque, beady eyes venomous as a rattlesnake's as he rode with hands bound behind him and feet lashed under his pony's belly, a brawny sergeant holding the halter of the prisoner's mount at the rear of the column. Torque was the right-hand fighting chief of his brother, whose own right hand was a scarred and withered claw from some old wound that had paralyzed it. Yet, the war was on when Clawfist, who had been holed up all the bitter winter down below the Border, sent his murderous brother across it to raid, with eight hundred more Apaches on the reservation taking Government beef and shelter through the cold months.

THE threat of battle came as regularly as the blooming of the cactus each spring. Would the reservation bucks break out and join Clawfist in a career of freedom and killing, or would they stay put, farming and hunting what game there was on the Government land allowed them?

Mason caught Torque's glowering scowl and tried to interpret it. He himself, as Intelligence Officer of Fort Williams, had drawn up the report that Colonel Church had forwarded to Southwest Department Headquarters six weeks ago, predicting that this spring Clawfist would go mad dog to bolster his waning power, and cross the Border for great coups of killing and looting that would bring a coppery-brown army racing to him off the reservation.

Now Mason had made the two weeks' spring patrol, and it had ended in battle—the first proof of his theory. But what did the high blue at Department Headquarters care for theories? His Intelligence report no doubt already was gathering dust in some file—dust like that now gritting his eyes.

And here came more dust in a speeding plume from east of the fort whose pointed log stockade, visible as a blur for a long while, at last was coming into clear focus. Two riders were crossing the desert at an angle that would take them into Mason's column, and one rode twenty yards ahead of the other. Officer and orderly, he could tell.

As they came on he could make out the lank, knob-shouldered figure of First Sergeant Fifer taking the dust of the leading rider. No officer in the fort would ever call out the first sergeant of G Company, Mason's own, to ride orderly and he couldn't identify the slim figure in the lead as that of any officer he knew. In his Intelligence report Mason had stressed the need for trained replacements, both of officers and men. But what kind of a replacement was this?

He groaned as the horsemen dipped down into a dry wash and came up over its lip not fifty yards away. The leading horseman was rising and falling in leather, posting instead of sitting to save a sore bottom. Another lieutenant fresh from West Point! Pulling his brand-new rank, with a gleaming yellow cavalry scarf over his face and a gleaming new campaign hat crammed far too low over his head. Only the young blue eyes showed as the boyish officer swung in ten yards away, and his gauntleted hand raised for the salute.

Mechanically Mason's hand went up with the old West Point snap as he stifled an exclamation. Another fledgling to be wet-nursed when Clawfist was out. The exclamation on the tip of his tongue changed to a muttered curse as the lieutenant's salute never even reached the brim of his hat, but turned off into a cheerful wave.

"Hello, sir," said a clear youthful voice.

Mason's nerves went raw. The rasp of rank crept into his own tone. "Where did you learn to salute, Lieutenant?"

A sudden flush crimsoned the boyish forehead. The shavetail's hand went up again and this time the salute was perfect. The blue eyes widened as they took in the battered detail with its wounded, and the blanketed load on

the horse that dripped scarlet.

"In action, sir?"

Again Mason's lacerated nerves went haywire. The hammering of the afternoon desert heat, the strain of battle and exhaustion, the calling up of all his reserve strength to make it back to the fort—all combined to whip his overtaxed system, and now this dapper silly fool topped it off!

"D'you think we've been to a picnic, Lieutenant? Are you from the Navy? We've been in action all right, and what you see in the blanket is what's left of a woman."

"Y-yes, Captain." Shock swept the shavetail's eyes and they were averted from the crimson load.

"Great Christopher!" exploded Mason. "Can't you even tell a lieutenant's bars from a captain's?" He couldn't stand the sight of this useless replacement any longer. "Kindly gallop ahead on that fresh horse of yours, Lieutenant, and tell Dr. Fields to be ready for three casualties. Also tell the Officer of the Day we have a prisoner for the guardhouse."

THE young second lieutenant swung his horse around. It was a private mount, one of the most magnificent roans Mason had ever seen.

"And sit down when you ride in that saddle. We don't post like jumping-jacks out here."

Again the flush flooded the small space of forehead between the lieutenant's hat and his handkerchief mask. His blue eyes darkened, then flashed furiously at the final rebuke. The boy was raw, but he had spirit. Mason had kept his voice low, the detail hadn't heard the bawling-out, but it had hurt the shavetail in his pride.

He had the look of being a handsome spoiled youth, and his mount certainly told of plenty of money aside from a second lieutenant's pay. Mason had had a feud with a young man like that once, and it had ended in the bitterest, fiercest fight in West Point's history. They hadn't called him Bullhead Mason in those days for nothing.

"Get going, Lieutenant," he ordered sharply.

"Yes, sir."

Spurs touched deep into the roan's flanks and the new shavetail was off, riding solidly and well. First Sergeant Fifer went past, with a grin that looked six inches wide on his saddled-colored, hatchet face. He looked as though he actually liked the job of being hauled out by a boy wonder to ride orderly.

"Plenty changes at the fort, sir," he called out to Mason as he pounded by.

Now the stockade loomed only half a mile away, and Mason signaled his tired detail on with a wave. The horses, smelling their stables, threw up their heads and jerked at reins.

At the south gate stocky Lieutenant Bellamy, Officer of the Day, waited with two armed troopers of the guard. In his face was curiosity, mixed with excitement. The same excitement ran in the crowd of unattached troopers pressing across the parade ground as the patrol came in. Buckets were dropped, hay forks were poised in air, the fatigue details nearby also were looking and listening.

"Torque, Clawfist's brother, Lieutenant Bellamy," Mason said wearily. "Lock him up good." He nodded to Torque's guard. "Turn him over, Sergeant Fawkes, then take the detail. Get the casualties into the hospital immediately." He urged his mount into a trot across the baked parade ground for Headquarters.

The sun glare cast shimmers off the adobe and frame buildings, and in the breathless heat the colors drooped at the top of the flagstaff. Here, Mason thought, was a post, scorched and quiescent, waiting to be waked by the word he brought, and every trooper in it would spring into swift action at that word.

As he dismounted at the splintered porch of Headquarters and draped his saddle-bags over his arm, the crackle of carbine fire drifted to him from the shooting range in the north. Any day now that practice fire would become savage volleys aimed at screeching, copper-brown targets.

He took the salute of the grizzled sergeant-major in the outer office, swinging in a fast stride for Colonel Church's inner room where, through the open door, he could see a figure in blue at the window. The desert grit was still in his eyes, blurring them as he halted, boot heels clicking, and saluted.

The old Army sentence fell from his cracked lips. "Lieutenant Mason, sir, reporting back from patrol."

He blinked and in the seconds it took to

clear his eyes the tall, magnificently built officer at the window turned. There he stood with his captain's insignia new on his shoulders—hard-muscled, bronzed, alert, and with a face that would have been incredibly handsome had it not been for the broken twist to the bridge of the aquiline nose.

Marred for life, just as Mason with the thick ridge of scar tissue over one eye was marred for life as far as looks went. In the same fight back of the stables the night after Graduation Day at West Point ten years ago.

"Hello, Bullhead! Bull-headed as ever?"

"Handsome Randy Reed! The general's boy!"

INSTINCTIVELY the old nicknames had sprung from their lips, and the old insults with them. Reed was standing ten feet from Mason, poised in the background of a pine-walled, sun-baked frontier Headquarters office, but suddenly the years fell away and they were back again in the flickering light of the stable lanterns, surrounded by a ring of cadets just made officers, toe to toe, smashing and pounding at each other.

Again the blood from his cut forehead seemed to be blinding Mason. Once more he could see Handsome Randy Reed's crimson ruin of a nose, he could feel Reed's fists cruelly driving into his ribs, could feel his own blows landing equally savagely on flesh. Pain didn't exist; only the mad rage of men trying to fell each other. A grudge fight still talked about in the ivied graystone buildings up the Hudson. No rounds, no rest, it had been a fight to the finish.

Once more Mason could feel his uppercut land full on Reed's chin, and in the same second feel Reed's terrific swing explode against his head. Double knockout it had been, they had stretched side by side, senseless—shortish, square-faced Bullhead Mason, son of a struggling upstate New York farmer, and Handsome Randolph Reed, son of Major General Burton Reed, brilliant and born to rise to gold braid, with every influence he had behind him.

They had been bound to meet again sometime. The cavalry was too small a service for their trails never to cross.

"How'd you get here, Reed?" asked Mason.

"I was transferred down from the Sioux country to Department Headquarters six weeks ago as Intelligence Officer. Went up to captain, and was moved here just after you started your patrol. Executive officer for Fort Williams, Intelligence Officer, and captain of G Company."

SHOCK stiffened every fiber in Mason. G Company was his own, he had come to know every trooper in it through years of heat and thirst and battle and boredom from gaunt, fortyish First Sergeant Fifer to two-headed young Schultz, the latest month-old recruit. He had lived, slept, worked, fought with them until they had become a welded, desperate fighting unit of which he was the brain.

Now this general's son was stepping in to take over its command, and he would serve as his subordinate officer. Handsome Randy Reed, who could master a book problem in minutes that took himself and others an hour. Handsome Randy, top honor man of their class, whose looks no girl could resist, the darling of the West Point hops, of the summer resorts on furlough, with his mother's money and his father's rank behind him.

"I'll be double damned if I'll serve under him!"

"You don't have to serve under me," said Reed.

His eyes suddenly glittered. His hand clenched. They'd never shaken hands after that fight, it came to Mason. He read the expression in Reed's marred face. Yes, it was still there with both of them, the old overmastering rage, gone cold and hard as steel with the years. He'd spoken his thought aloud without realizing it.

"Don't have to serve under you?" repeated Mason.

"No. And I'll tell you why. As Intelligence Officer at Department Headquarters that report of yours on Clawfist came to me. It came through as written by you, Mason, with Colonel Church noting that it was so exceptional he meant to add nothing to it except to tie up a loose end or so in a covering page. He seems to be a colonel who gives absolute credit to the officers under his command.

"Mason, besides being a bullhead who crashes headlong into everything, you seem

to have developed into one hell of a fine Intelligence Officer. I took that report of yours right in to Brigadier General Tyler, Commanding General of the Southwest Department, who is an old friend of my father's, and recommended it be forwarded to Washington as a practically perfect analysis of the Apache war mentality and methods, and an excellent prediction of an outbreak by Clawfist this spring. Also I recommended your transfer with promotion to Washington Intelligence where your new talents would be of tremendous value."

"You dirty dog, you stole my troop! You used your father's influence to sidetrack me!"

"I didn't steal your troop, Bullhead. I used whatever pull I had to try to get you promoted."

"You damned liar!"

"Stop it, Mason!" In Reed's voice was an accent of command! "We'll drop personalities. We seem to have waked up an old fight before attending to fort business. I'm in charge of Headquarters in the Colonel's absence. Who's your Injun prisoner? What's your report?"

Mason's teeth clenched. "I'll save that for Colonel Church."

It was unbearable to accept as his superior this wire-pulling officer who had ditched his combat career, and who technically was correct in his stand. He gestured toward the documents on the desk, neatly stacked for reading and obviously just in.

"Go ahead with the Colonel's paper work, Captain Handsome Randy Reed. I suppose you open his private mail?"

Reed's eyes flared. "That's enough, Lieutenant Mason!"

"Is it? It's easy enough to swipe a lieutenant's troop, but you may find it harder to swipe a colonel's job."

Reed's right fist hardened into a ball, and so did Mason's. In another instant would they be at each other again? Mason hoped so. One more taunt might start it off. He'd try it.

"And I suppose you're responsible for transferring here that mamma's boy shavetail I met just outside the fort and bawled out? It'll take a year to train that rookie lieutenant into anything, and Clawfist is out already!"

"Yes," said the shavetail's boyish voice from the doorway behind Mason, "he's responsible."

MASON turned around. She was slim, she was honey-haired, she was grace and firm young strength in every line of her aristocratic figure, enhanced by a light-colored print. She was the loveliest picture Mason had ever seen.

He realized now that the deep blue eyes with their long lashes and the intelligent forehead had been all that had showed above her dust-caked cavalry scarf out there on the desert. The new shavetail at Fort Williams had been this glowing girl!

"Lieutenant Mason, an old classmate of mine at the Point, Leslie," Reed said in a controlled voice. "My sister, Lieutenant."

Somehow Mason drew himself up and managed the West Point bow, the height of drilled decorum. Leslie Reed's level gaze swept from his scar-tissued, square-jawed face with the rugged lines his dust mask no longer hid to the remnant of her brother's good looks that Mason's fists had ruined.

He had never known Reed had a sister. She was years younger, too young ten years ago to have been anything but a schoolgirl in pigtails worshipping her hero older brother. All younger sisters did, glamorizing them. And he had smashed the glamor out of Handsome Randy Reed who hated him for it still. This girl, he knew, would hate him even more for wrecking her brother's face. She'd hate him all her life.

"May I apologize, Miss Reed, for my discourteous words to you out there on the desert?" Mason was making his apology in a stiff voice that seemed to have only a note of perfunctory duty in it. "Naturally I didn't realize—"

"There's no reason you should have known I was riding in the blouse which Second Lieutenant Wilkinson—he's new here, too—insisted on lending me. I always use Army kit riding. And First Sergeant Fifer of G insisted on riding orderly."

Both would insist, reflected Mason. Everybody would insist on doing everything for Leslie Reed. The General's daughter would have a pull around any post she graced, just as Handsome Randy Reed had the pull of the General's son. As a team they would be unbeatable.

He tried to say something and his dust

caked throat was too dry for speech. His nerves were still raw, his stomach stretched drumlike, for reaction from battle still claimed him.

"Afraid I'm not a great success as a shavetail, Mr. Mason," Leslie Reed said. "Let's forget it." She shrugged with well-bred casualness.

Mason felt that he had been thoroughly inspected and dismissed. This vivid and lovely general's daughter would be worshiped by every young officer and enlisted man on the post. Except himself. Leslie Reed, he felt instinctively, was going to be worse poison to him than Handsome Randy.

"Ah—er—" he fumbled.

A slim hand brushed words aside as unimportant. "Any mail for me, Randy? I passed the mail wagon coming in from my ride."

Reed lifted a lavender envelope with a flourishing handwritten address from the desk top.

"Clarice's purple scrawl." Leslie smiled. "All the Washington gossip fresh from Mrs. Major Barker. I'll have to give you a letter of introduction to her, Lieutenant. She'll steer you through the social pitfalls and get you a moneyed bride, Lieutenant Mason. Teapot intrigues and tempests are her lifeblood."

"I'm not going to Washington!" exploded Mason.

"No?" she said evenly. "Second Lieutenant Hunt has gone up to first in G, and Mr. Wilkinson has been posted as its new second. There have been changes since you went on patrol."

There had been, wide and deep and damnable. Sergeant Fifer had thrown the warning to him. There was no place in G Company for the man who had been its leader up until now, for Bullhead Mason, who had forged and tempered it into cold steel. He had been licked by a general's son and now a general's daughter was rubbing it in.

He choked down the hot words that sprang to his lips as the challenge of the gate sentry traveled the parade ground. Through the gate B and D Companies were coming back from carbine practice at the range, and Mason could see the wide-shouldered figure of Colonel Church swinging his Irish hunter into the spot were Bellamy was saluting.

MASON knew why Bellamy had stopped the Colonel. He was reporting Torque as a prisoner. Colonel Church looked instantly toward Headquarters, barked an order behind him and threw his mount into a fast trot. Colonel Church never let the grass grow under his horse's hoofs when any Indians were out.

"This is no place for me with the Colonel coming with that look on his face," said Leslie lightly. "I'll go curl up with a fan and Clarice's letter."

She waved and was gone. Colonel Church swung off his horse and his fast strides sounded almost immediately. He swung into the office, snapping back Mason's and Reed's salutes in motion. Under his graying mustache his mouth was a thin line, his sun-bronzed face hard. He was talking before he reached the desk.

"Bellamy tells me you got Torque, Lieutenant Mason. Excellent. Just a brief outline first, please."

Mason reported briefly and quickly. "Late in the afternoon yesterday, last day of patrol, we sighted smoke along the mountain wall beyond Mule Pass. We headed for it and found fifteen Apaches around the burned wreckage of two wagons with what they'd left of three new settlers. They ran hell-for-leather, taking a white woman they'd captured along with them. We chased them in a running fight all night and rode them down finally in a box canyon. We got all but two and captured Torque, the leader. They killed the woman as we closed in. It means that Clawfist is out, I think, sir."

"So do I." Colonel Church tossed a thin manila envelope that protruded from the upper pocket of his tunic onto the desk. "And we'll be ready for him. It's all in this dispatch I read at the range."

"It was stamped 'Rush,' sir," said Reed. "I didn't delay to open it, but pushed it straight to you by rider."

"Good judgment, Reed. Department Headquarters notifies me that they are sending two infantry companies and an extra cavalry troop to Fort Williams at once. The walk-a-heaps will act as garrison, giving us a full squadron of cavalry to take the field against Clawfist. But there's a puzzling angle in here. Department has a verified report that one hundred

of Clawfist's hitherto irreconcilable braves turned themselves in to the reservation two weeks ago, half-starved and apparently submissive at last. Department figures a single good show of force can make the rest, maybe Clawfist himself, come in and we can finally wrap up this endless Border war."

"I think that would be it, sir," said Reed. "In Department Intelligence we estimated Clawfist's strength in the spring at around three hundred. That would mean he's lost one-third of them to the reservation. This settler killing by Torque may be the independent action of a blood-mad subchief. It may have been actuated by vindictive weakness and not strength."

"It was actuated by the knowledge that not only Clawfist hasn't lost a single brave to the reservation, but that he's going to gain about five hundred reinforcements with which to let loose the worst massacres the Border has ever seen!" The words seemed to break of their own force from Mason.

"What's that?" asked Colonel Church sharply, his keen gaze leveled on Mason.

"Look at the e I brought back."

Mason lifted the saddlebags he had pitched onto a wall chair, and spilled their contents on the desk. There they lay, eight gaily-beaded Apache headbands, two of them soaked with blood.

"Headbands off the Apaches we got. Those are the kind of headbands the trader's post sells to the Apaches at the reservation. Half the killers of those settlers came off the reservation, Colonel!"

THINGS that Mason had been groping for were clear now. The fragments of the Intelligence puzzle he had been mulling over were fitting together to make the full picture.

For a moment the two men before him were silent, then Colonel Church urged:

"Go on, Mr. Mason."

"Those hundred fighting bucks didn't go in to the reservation to surrender and eat beef," Mason said grimly. "They went in to stir up the hundreds of other fighting-age Apaches and get them to break out and join Clawfist. They're secret agents of Clawfist, that's what. Those headbanded Apaches we struck were some of Clawfist's spies, returning to bring word that the whole reservation is going to rise. So Torque hit the first caravan he found, used them to open the war. He didn't feel like waiting."

For a long moment Colonel Church stared at Mason, his eyes clouded with concentration.

"Mason," he said then, "I'm putting this on the wire to Department immediately."

Mason pointed to the window. "Here comes Department now, Colonel, or I miss another guess."

Kicking up whorls of dust, a long-legged corporal was running fast toward Headquarters from the adobe Signals shack. A field telegraph form showed yellow in his hand. He clattered across the outer office and into the room, saluted, and held the message out to Colonel Church.

"Just in, sir. Rush."

Colonel Church read the form at a glance.

"You hit it on the nose, Mason," he said quietly. "Corporal Gates, tell the Headquarters bugler outside to sound Officers' Call instantly."

"Yes, sir."

The corporal darted out and in moments the brassy notes of the bugle tore the stillness.

"Here it is, gentlemen," said Colonel Church and read aloud:

> Indian agent wires whole reservation shows signs of rising with war dances now going on. Infantry guard insufficient and not mobile. Entrain two troops from fort for reservation immediately, yourself commanding, and put down threatened breakout. Use your own judgment at reservation, you are in full authority as ranking officer on spot. Infantry entraining at base to replace cavalry as garrison at fort.
>
> Charles Tyler
> Brigadier General
> Commanding Department
> of Southwest

Silence, pregnant with tension, fell in the sun-washed room. The only sound was the droning of horseflies on the ceiling. Then Colonel Church spoke.

"B and D Companies go. They're up to strength. G Company isn't. It stays to garrison the post. This order means stripping the fort to a skeleton defense until the infantry gets here twenty-four hours from now, but that's Department's judgment and it's mine. A single swift stroke of prevention can stall

off a whole desert war. The reservation is the point of immediate danger now, not the Border."

"It can change," Mason said grimly.

"It's a risk that has to be run."

Church paused, face dark with thought. Every possibility, every chance, Mason knew, was being evaluated. Here was a cavalry leader who believed in fast action. If he reached the reservation in time he'd bottle up the war-dancing killers. If he didn't—

Was the massacre of the white woman and her menfolk going to be multiplied by scores, even hundreds of times, along the Border as Clawfist burned and killed, with a copper-skinned army at his back?

"Captain Reed," said the Colonel. "I'm turning the staff work of entrainment over to you."

REED was writing on forms at a table next to the wall. "It's done, sir. I know the transportation situation at railhead, Colonel. Last week I went over it thoroughly with the station master, as falling under my exec's job. I have the wire here to him to roll out cattle cars from the sidings for B's and D's horses, and flatcars for the troopers and their equipment. There's always one engine at the livestock pens, and I've commandeered the switch engine also to run the train under double head. MacTavish, the station master, is a good man. He'll have the train ready for us with steam up before we get there. Load and blow the whistle with a clear track ahead, that's all."

"Good! We'll leave here pronto. The troops will travel on emergency rations. We should reach the reservation by dawn."

"Before that, with two engines pulling. Emergency rations can be held back, Colonel." Reed lifted the form. "This second wire is to Quartermaster Sergeant Murtagh at our railhead supply depot. It authorizes him to sign for boilers of beans, filled with all the pork the Boston Restaurant across from the station can dig up, and to load them on flat cars, red-hot. I've talked that one over with Old Man Curry who owns the Boston. He says he can fill an emergency order for every trooper in this fort inside an hour. He's an old Union Army cook, knows troops fight best on full bellies. Wire Number Three notifies the Indian agent and the infantry commander at the reservation when the cavalry should arrive.

"Excellent, Reed." Colonel Church commended heartily.

"Then one to Department Headquarters—"

"I'll write that one myself. I hear the officers outside. Just step out and tell them what's afoot. I'll be there in a moment or so."

"Yes, sir."

With fast steps Reed went by Mason. Handsome Randy Reed, the cadet wonder, who mastered the book in minutes. Captain Randolph Reed, now of G Company, exec for the fort, who solved the problem of entrainment with a flick of the hand.

Mason had to admit he had been looking on the work of a born staff officer, incredibly swift and far-seeing. Handsome Randy knew how to get troops to the scene of action fast and send them into it with full bellies to fight on, which could be half the battle.

Mason turned toward the desk where Colonel Church was just signing his telegram.

"Do I go on the reservation action with B or D, sir? Since Captain Reed has been posted to G, and Hunt has gone to first lieutenant, with a new second assigned, I seem to be a supernumerary officer."

"You don't go on the reservation action, Mason—you go to Washington," Colonel Church said crisply. "There were other papers in that Department 'Rush' envelope beside the dispatch I told you about. One is an order transferring you to Washington Intelligence as a captain as of yesterday's date, with orders to report there at the end of a thirty-day furlough. You've got your step, Mason. Congratulations."

"Captain in Washington Intelligence?"

"Exactly. Brigadier General Tyler has given you the push up on that report of yours, and you're out of the Border rut. I'm sorry to lose a more than valuable officer here but you've earned the promotion. They want to develop our Intelligence section more fully. There's gold braid at last that looks to the future. You can go higher than captain in Washington quickly, Mason. Maybe to major before you're two years older."

"Major Mason," Mason said bitterly. "Claping his spurs into the sides of his desk and

galloping off in all directions, waving a quill pen."

"You'll come back to combat. Your kind always does."

"In about twenty years."

"Damn it, Mason, do you want to rot out ten or fifteen years between promotions in dusty, idle frontier posts? Or do you want to be in there advancing and working for the Army's future? You're lucky you got the push from General Tyler."

GENERAL TYLER? It was Handsome Randy Reed, the man he detested, who had put the push in behind Mason, and he'd done it to swipe his job. Randy was smart enough to make it look like his superior's work; he was smart enough to smile when he told Mason what he'd done.

"I'd hoped for the captaincy of G, sir. I'd hoped for the capture of Torque—"

"This new job is even better, Mason, you'll find. I sensed something was in the offing for you when Reed was posted here to take over G. I've never mentioned it, but don't think I haven't heard of the bad blood between Bullhead Mason and Handsome Randy Reed. Your set-to is a part of West Point cadet history, and West Point history gets around. I had a grudge fight out back of those stables myself, Mason, a good many years ago. Tell me, did you two shake hands and wipe it out? Or does that bad blood between you still exist?"

Mason said nothing.

"I see. It still exists, so perhaps it's as well you're going to Washington. The morale of this post could go to hell completely with you two in it battling each other. You and Reed are two totally different types of officers, Mason. You're all combat experience, with a flair on the side for Intelligence, and he's all Intelligence and staff with a dash of combat on the side. His combat record up North was short but creditable. There's some kind of rumor around that he really did something. But there are always rumors about a general's son. You've seen a bit of his staff work. Reed is the best executive officer this post has ever had."

"Yes, sir," Mason said sourly.

"Be as bull-headed as you please, Mason." Colonel Church smiled. "You'll be under Reed's command only overnight. I suppose you'll start your furlough tomorrow morning? Got a place to go?"

"Plenty."

No near living relatives, the old farm sold years ago. Mason's eyes strayed out to the parade ground, where the dust whorls spun in the glare. His ears caught the stamping of cavalry horses in the stables, the clang of the farrier's hammer on anvil and the excited, small noises that told him the troops knew action was up. His nose smelled leather and men's sweat.

This was his home, Fort Williams and G Company, the only home he had known since he had come out a raw, wet-eared shavetail from the Point. And Reed had thrown him out of it.

"Captain Reed!" Church's voice went up.

"Coming, sir," rose the confident answer. Reed swung into the room. "All briefed, sir. B and D set to go the instant Boots and Saddles sounds, and Captains Castleman and Hillier report. As fort exec I've been holding daily inspections and check-ups, filling in requisitions on equipment for ten days now. You'll lead a force out the gate that won't have a shoe or a shell missing."

"Good! Captain Reed, the fort is yours. I'm turning its command over to you. Mason goes on furlough tomorrow, he's been promoted to Washington Intelligence as a captain. It's in those papers."

"Congratulations, Captain Mason," said Handsome Randy Reed easily. "Glad to hear it."

Mason glared at him. More sham, more polite pretense, from the man who'd engineered a dirty job behind his back.

"Torque's in your charge, Reed, as a prisoner. Get what information from him you can."

"I'll question him until his teeth rattle."

Mason's glare grew harder. "No Apache's teeth ever rattle."

At the door Colonel Church turned.

"I have no further orders for you, Captain Reed, or for you, Captain Mason. But I have a request for you both. You're still young men, you have many years ahead of you in the Army. You may easily meet again and have to work together at higher ranks. Shake

hands and call off that old feud."

He went out.

OUTSIDE, Colonel Church's voice was raised in orders to the officers. The blare of Boots and Saddles crashed across the post and turned its quiet into a medley of shouts and running feet. The troops were going out, and Mason wasn't going with them. Maybe he would never ride with troops again.

"Well, Bullhead?"

Handsome Randy Reed stood behind the Colonel's desk, the CO of the post. His hands rested lightly on its top. He did not move. Mason did. He thrust his hands behind him and locked them into tight fists.

"It'll take more than a colonel's request to make me love you, Reed," Mason said.

Reed went red under his tan and his broken nose twisted to one side.

"Bullhead, I'm CO of this post. You get the hell off it the first thing in the morning. That's no request. That's a direct order."

From the corner of his eye Mason caught a flash of color up the parade ground and turned a little to look out the window that gave to the north. Vivid and graceful, Leslie Reed was moving onto the porch of an Officers' Row cottage to watch the troops go out. Handsome Randy Reed hated his guts, Mason thought, and so did Leslie. A mounting rage against both of them filled him.

"I'll go, Handsome Randy," he said thickly. "I never thought it'd be a pleasure to obey an order of yours before."

He went to his quarters but, tired as he was, he could not sleep. He was restless, resentful, dreading what lay ahead of him before his last preparations for his departure were made, but which must be done.

It was getting late when at last he swarmed up the last few rungs of the ladder and swung himself off onto the firing platform by the south gate.

He felt dull, emotionally drained. The last haunting notes of *Taps* were drifting across the moonlit, deserted parade ground and he had no idea when he would hear them again at an Army post.

It hadn't been easy, that visit to G Company's lanternlit barracks just half an hour ago, to say good-by to the men he had led through desert heat and battle. Hard men, weathered men, loyal men. They hadn't said much beyond "Luck to you, Captain," and "Sorry to see the Captain go," but there had been a world of emotion behind the few words of a permanent farewell. Their callused handclasps had been so strong his hand still was feeling sore from them.

Now it was over, the last link with G had been broken, and he wanted some of the desert night breeze to take the heat and fury out of his system.

He went on along the palisades to the corner jut of the watchtower, where he halted and looked over the waste of sand and cactus that stretched to the Border. Out there, he knew, twenty miles away in the night, Clawfist's tireless brain was working, plotting fire and mutilation.

Wholesale war again! And until the head of the doughboys' column marched through the gate, Fort Williams here was a stripped and helpless post with not more than fifty troopers and its small Gatling crews to defend it and its women and children. But Clawfist couldn't know that two of its troops had galloped out to stop his war.

Still tension rode Mason. He drew his cigar case from his tunic pocket and sat down on the platform with his back against the pointed log stockade. He got the cigar going and closed his eyes, drawing in the soothing smoke. His breath came easier, his jangled nerves felt relaxed. Here on the desert in the moon-drenched night with myriad stars crowding low in the blue-black vault a man sometimes could know an incredible peace.

"Forget Clawfist," he muttered. "Forget the General's son. Forget the General's daughter."

The peace broke with a snap. A woman's clear voice cut into it, and through the swirling smoke he saw her, as light as gossamer and as lovely, standing before him in white. He hadn't heard her come up the ladder by the watchtower.

"Dreaming, Captain Mason?"

"Ah—er—you—"

FROM the bosom of her dress Leslie Reed drew a square letter.

"Did I hear you say something about 'Forget the General's daughter' in your sleep?

The General's daughter didn't forget you, Captain Mason. I sent an orderly to your quarters and First Sergeant Fifer, who'd just finished packing your things, told him you'd headed up here for some air. So I came along with this letter of introduction to Clarice Barker in Washington. She'll take care of you, as I said."

The light-hearted raillery in her voice stung him to the quick.

"Thanks," he said. "But I don't think it will be at all necessary."

"Do you plan to spend your evenings leading a patrol along the Potomac or over into Virginia, Captain Mason?" She laughed, and it had a trill in it. "The shooting war along the Potomac has been over for twenty years. But the social warfare in the drawing rooms still goes on. You'll be a valuable warrior among the plush portieres with Clarice's introductions, Captain Mason. You'll like the social season in Washington. I love it myself."

She would. Surrounded by gold braid and dashing younger officers, none of them rating less than a major, Leslie Reed would go from one social triumph to another, year after year. In a matter of hours, on two meetings, she had made a terrific impact on him.

Now she was deepening and strengthening that emotion in him, and he resented her type of flawless, useless society beauty, utterly misplaced in a battle-menaced frontier post. He didn't want any favors from her, he meant to tear that letter in half. Instead he found himself fumbling it into his tunic pocket.

"How did you ever happen to come out here?" he heard his voice asking.

"A Washington winter can be pretty exhausting. You never stop going for a single night. For the last five years I've always visited Randy at his posts, to recuperate in the spring. I can get plenty of riding and picnicking, and look at something beside city blocks. You wouldn't believe it, but I was an Army brat when I was little, and Father was only a colonel. Long, long, ago that was."

Long, long ago was right. Mason could guess that even then she'd been a hopelessly spoiled little creature, well deserving the name of brat. Now she was out visiting one of those quaint, dusty old posts full of quaint, dusty soldiers like himself. But just the same she was a living, vital flame of beauty.

"Are you going to be in Washington this winter?" he asked her.

"I plan to go abroad. But Clarice can do everything for you. Dinners, receptions, dances—"

"I haven't been to a dance since the Graduation Hop at West Point. I'm not a dancing man."

"Just a fighting man?" The light tone deepened, the girl spoke seriously. "What was that fight between you and Randy about after the Graduation Hop? He's never told me anything except that you hated each other all the way through the Point, and that it came to a head at the dance."

"I—ah—er—"

Again Mason found himself fumbling for words. What *had* that fight been about? The memory had dimmed. Trying hard to call back the events of ten years ago, some of them came.

"I'd brought a red-headed girl from my home town who was crazy about handsome men," he said, "and I wasn't that. Your brother Randy took her out in the moonlight and she stayed there with him for two straight dances I was booked for on her program. At supper I happened to stumble carrying a tray of lemon sherbet and it went all over Randy's dress trousers. He had to go back to barracks for an hour to clean them off. That put the climax on things."

"And so you scarred each other for life. My brother *was* the handsomest man I've ever seen until you beat him up. For years, Captain Mason, I hated you as I've never hated any man."

"Of course," he said bitterly. "I take that for granted. And your brother still hates me. That's why he engineered my transfer in Washington, so he could get my troop."

"I helped him engineer it. I wrote Clarice Barket, who has tremendous influence among the big gold braids' wives, to push you. And don't think she didn't."

BITTER rage swept Mason. "You—you worked to shove me back to a desk in Washington? And now you want to make a drawing-room tin soldier out of me with your letter to Clarice Barker? Well,

you've got me back of the desk. But you'll never get me into the drawing rooms. You're a good hater, Miss Reed."

"Yes," she said, "I am."

"And here comes a better one," he said.

Down by the gate a tall figure was just lifting onto the firing platform from the ladder. Handsome Randy Reed, making an inspection of his fort's defenses, and he would be in a black mood. He'd spent an hour with Torque right after the troops had gone.

"I'll go," the girl said swiftly. "I'll leave you to him, Captain Bullhead Mason."

She was off down the ladder, and apparently Reed hadn't noticed her presence. In the moonlight as he approached Mason his forehead knotted with unpleasant thoughts, his jaw was set. Mason, sitting on his box, tried to relax. Reed stopped short when he saw him.

"Taking it easy, Mason?" he said curtly.

"Very." Mason let out a long puff from his cigar. He couldn't resist the thrust. "Torque's teeth rattle, Reed?"

"No, damn you!" grated Reed. "Not even a grunt out of him. The devil just glared as though he had a reserve card up his sleeve."

"An Apache always has something up his sleeve."

Mason let out another puff and Reed drew out a cigar himself. The snick of the match sounded loud in the night.

"Under cover, Reed, like I am," Mason advised. "This isn't Sioux country where the Injuns don't attack forts. We look out for Apaches after dark."

He rose to his feet, ready to put his hand on Reed's arm and draw it down, but the match flared, and as its flame went to the cigar Reed's face was clear in its glow.

"The mesquite, Reed! Down."

"Huh?"

Too late Mason saw the two shadowy men who came to their feet in a mesquite clump not sixty yards out, one bending a bow, the other bringing up his rifle. Reed's head, squarely between the points of the palisade was a mark no Apache would miss at that range, and Mason was feet away from him. The whoosh of the arrow shaft bridged the distance, and there was a thud in the palisade as Mason slammed hard with his open hand against the side of Reed's head.

"You damned fool, duck!" he yelled.

MASON heard the crack of the rifle and felt the vicious burn in his forearm as Reed's head jerked away under the impact of the blow.

Knocked off-balance Reed went sprawling. Face conveulsed with fury, he scrambled to his feet and dived for Mason, fist swinging.

"Damn you, Bullhead! If you want a fight you get it!"

"Injuns, I told you!"

Deafened by the hard slap against his ear and blinded by rage, Reed plunged for Mason, launching a savage straight arm for his chin. Mason jumped aside and, carried forward by his impetus with nothing to check him, Reed plunged the few feet to the platform's edge and went over it, spread-eagled in air. From the ground below sounded the thud of his body.

Mason shouted, "Watchtower! Sentries! Injuns!"

He ran for the watchtower stairs and up them onto the base where the sentries stood at the Gatling. A single look along the wall of the fort was enough. The white-shirted figure that leaped from the window of the guardhouse by the gate landed on the sand on all-fours, wrenched upright, and raced with incredible speed for safety.

Torque! Torque was free! Every mesquite clump and rock within two hundred yards of the stockade seemed to spit fire as the hidden Apaches covered his race to freedom.

"Put the Gatling on him! Cut Torque down!"

The revolving barrels of the gun opened in a sheet of flame. But it was useless.

It was like trying to bring down a fly with a sledge-hammer. From along the walls the sentries snapshot and missed. Lead splashed the sand in front of and behind the moccasined feet of Torque but the target was too fleeting. All along the stockade troopers were firing and cursing, answering the darts of flame on the desert as the Indian bullets and arrows swept over the logs.

"Here come the horses, sir!"

"Give me that gun!"

Torque tore on, now more than a hundred yards in the clear, and beyond him Mason glimpsed the tight-packed body of Clawfist's

riders, with an Indian out ahead of them leading a free pony. Clawfist had planned superbly, thrusting his force up into short range of the fort under cover of the cloud-rack that earlier had veiled the moon, invisible as Apaches always were. Once on that pony Torque would be away!

Over the barrels of the Gatling he had jumped behind Mason sighted, and triggered well in advance of the storming Indians. He saw his bullets gouge sand, lifted his fire and let the Indians run into it. Half-naked bodies, hit by that devastating blast, plunged off their horses' backs and writhed on the earth. But Torque ran on, unhit, swung to his pony's back, and as Mason tried for him in a last burst he galloped into the night that swallowed him and the remnant of Clawfist's mounted attackers.

Mason was conscious that First Sergeant Fifer, stripped to his breeches, was bellowing orders from the firing platform beyond the gate, and that suddenly awakened and half-dressed troopers were streaming up the ladders, carbines in hand. The fort was in an uproar.

From behind mesquite clumps and boulders Indians jumped up and ran to where more riders with led horses could be seen. A long fusillade spouted flame along the firing platform but it, too, was useless.

"Cease firing!" yelled Mason. "They got away with it!"

His heart was a leaden thing. Only too well he knew what was coming now. Massacre!

He lifted the cavalry scarf that hung around his neck and mopped cold sweat from his forehead. Then he was going down the stairs and along the platform to the gate. Barefooted and half-naked to the waist, Sergeant Fifer stood on the platform across the way.

"Send a detail out with a light wagon, Sergeant," said Mason. "Bring in all the Apache dead you can find, for sign."

"Yes, sir."

MASON went down the ladder and faced Second Lieutenant Wilkinson, the new replacement for G, and Officer of the Day in charge of the guardhouse. His round young face was conscience-stricken and his salute was ragged. A heavy file dangled in his left hand.

"So that's the way Torque did it?" demanded Mason harshly.

"Yes, sir. I found it on the floor of his cell. He filed through the bottom of the bars and wrenched them out by main strength. I don't know how he got—"

"I do," snapped Mason. "Clawfist sent it in to him. You don't know yet that an Apache inching himself along the sand is absolutely invisible when the moon goes dark. You haven't been out here long enough to know that the way to guard an Apache in a cell is to put a guard in with him. You've got a lot to learn, Lieutenant Wilkinson."

"Yes, sir," Wilkinson said miserably.

"So forget your first mistake and pull yourself together. There's plenty of work to be done from here on."

"Yes, sir." Wilkinson's face lightened. "Orders, sir?"

"You'll get them later on. Where's Captain Reed?"

Only now realization came to Mason that throughout the action his had been the only officer's voice raised in command. When Handsome Randy Reed had plunged off the firing platform oblivion had swallowed him up. Mason himself had given commands and directed the battle as though he had been actually in command of the post.

"I haven't seen Captain Reed, sir. Lieutenant Hunt came running out of Headquarters, headed for Watchtower Southwest where you were, and he's still over there."

Wilkinson pointed and Mason saw the huddle near the base of the tower where the ambulance stood. The sweat grew colder on his gritty body as he started at top speed for the group. Rangy and capable, Lieutenant Hunt stood at the rear step of the ambulance, turning as Mason broke in through the half-dozen troopers.

"Hunt! What goes on?"

"Oh, here you are, Captain Mason! I started for the tower when the firing broke and heard you going into action up there. You didn't need me, so I turned to this job. I've loaded Captain Reed."

Mason swung into the ambulance. By the wavering light of a lantern held by a stout medical corporal, Dr. Fields, the civilian contract surgeon of the fort, was bending over the

stretcher. Reed's polished cavalry boot and expensive yellow-striped breeches had been cut away, baring the leg that was a ghastly mass of splintered bone projecting through the flesh above the knee. Reed lay there, eyes closed, face sunken, beathing stertorously as Fields thrust the hypodermic syringe into his upper arm. The doctor drove the merciful drug home and turned as Mason's shadow loomed over him.

"He's had the devil of a fall, Mason. I've never seen a worse knee. And he may have a concussion."

Dr. Fields spoke directly. He was too hardened by the bitter school of Army post casualties to minimize or exaggerate. He was reliable to the core; he told the truth, whether good or bad. He had gone gray of beard, and stoop-shouldered taking care of the Army.

"Out of action, Doctor?"

"For a month at least. Longer maybe." The doctor bent down.

The lines of pain in Reed's face had gone, for the morphine had taken over. In the lanternlight his face suddenly seemed years younger, and shadows wiped out the twist in the nose. He was Handsome Randy Reed, the super-brilliant West Point honor man again, unmarred, incredibly good-looking.

The doctor straightened. "That's all I can do for the present, Mason. I'll ride to the hospital beside the driver. I can do with a cigar. Come along, Corporal."

The doctor dropped to the ground with his medico, passing Lieutenant Hunt who had climbed onto the step.

"Any orders, sir?" Hunt asked Mason.

THEY were exactly the words young Lieutenant Wilkinson had used at the gate, looking to Mason for command. And he was a supernumerary officer transferred to Washington Intelligence, with no authority to give an order in Fort Williams!

"You're the post C.O., Hunt. I'm detached. With Captain Reed out, you take over the fort by regulations."

"Damn regulations!" exclaimed Hunt. "If you want regulations you're the ranking officer here right now. You're a combat captain and you're back with G Company as far as I'm concerned. We want you to take the fort. I want you back, the men I'm sure want you back."

Behind Hunt in the lantern's glow the faces of the troopers were hard-bitten and grinning.

"C'mon back, Cap'n." A scar-cheeked private rolled his quid of tobacco and spat on the ground. Mason knew him—a guardhouse character, and a desperate fighting man. "I speaks for all."

"I don't think I should—"

"Take the fort, Captain Mason," said a clear, coldly furious voice from behind him. "No matter how you made the chance for yourself, take the fort."

Mason swept around. The blocky form of the medico holding the lantern over Reed had hidden Leslie Reed, waiting back at the end of the ambulance.

"Miss Reed!"

"Helping the doctor. After all, the commanding officer you knocked off the platform happens to be my brother."

"Knocked off the platform?" echoed Mason.

The ambulance gave a jolt and started forward.

"My dress caught in the bottom of the ladder," she called. "It took me a minute or so to get it free. So I heard you call Randy a damned fool and I heard your fist go into him and his challenge to fight. Then he came hurtling off the platform onto the ground, and you stepped into his shoes."

Mason stood silent in shock. He felt a trickle running down the fingers of his right hand and looked down at the blood that had dripped from the bullet graze on his forearm. That forearm had been where Randy Reed's head showed between the stockade points, it had taken the bullet that would have drilled Handsome Randy clean. He pulled the arm quickly behind his back, out of sight.

"You can't hope to deny it?" she said challengingly.

"No," he said.

The ambulance had increased pace, the mules were trotting. What was the use of trying to convince this girl who had hated him for years? In the glow of the lantern rocking on the floor her lovely face was rigid with emotion. For a moment the only sound was the heavy breathing of Reed, unconscious on the stretcher.

"So now what, Captain Mason?"

Mason moved onto the rear step of the ambulance. It was just passing the Headquarters building and in there was plenty of work to do, swift and desperate work.

"So now," he said, "Clawfist and a couple of hundred Apaches at least will attack the fort. And they'll overrun it."

His heels hit earth hard as he jumped off the step and headed for Headquarters. Hunt had followed the ambulance at a run. He pounded onto the porch directly behind Mason.

"Tough spot, isn't it, Mason?"

"None tougher. If Clawfist is out there on the desert, as I think he is, Torque will reach him in no time. Torque saw the two full troops with Colonel Church at their head gallop past his cell window, he knows we've got a garrison of only fifty troopers left. As soon as Clawfist knows it I don't think he'll waste any time attacking. I know how Clawfist's mind works. So do you."

"He'll attack. Any plans? Fort up inside in one of the buildings?"

"Fire arrows will take care of any buildings. Want to choose between roasting, or running out to be shot down? We've got women and children, at least thirty of 'em to protect, damn it!"

"Let the fort go and make an immediate run for it to railhead?"

"And let Clawfist burn the fort without a fight? Every Apache between here and the Rio Grande would join him. It'd take a year to establish another base. We're supposed to fight for our forts, Hunt!"

HOOVES clattered and axles creaked and the wagon with the detail of troopers drew abreast of Headquarters building and halted, its pile of bodies partially visible over the sideboards. Still shoeless and half-naked, Sergeant Fifer led a motley squad of similarly undressed troopers clad, as the Apache attack had caught them, some only in their shirts, and all riding barebacked horses. They looked as wild as the Apaches they had brought in.

"Lay them out, Sergeant," said Mason. "I'll try for sign."

The unloaded bodies, torn by Gatling fire, were stretched on the hard earth, and by lanternlight Mason scrutinized each one. Two of them were clad in bloodied tunics, the others were stripped and breech-clouted. He rose from his inspection, frowning.

"These two shirts are new. Their wearers are just off the reservation and they're from another tribe. The others are Clawfist's fighters. I'd read it the reservation bucks are beginning to stream in to Clawfist already, and that he used some on the party he sent to rescue Torque when those two Apaches who got away told him of the capture. That means he'll wait the night out to get as many reinforcements as possible. It should probably give us until dawn at least."

He stood up, his mind racing to avert disaster and finding nothing.

"These dead ones all, Sergeant? No wounded Apaches to bring in?"

"These two was wounded, sir." Fifer jerked his thumb toward two bodies. "You savvy wounded Apaches. They tried the old rattlesnake act but the boys was faster on the trigger. You got to fight fire with fire, Apaches like Apaches."

"Right, Sergeant."

Fight fire with fire. Fight Apaches like Apaches? The sudden thought exploded in Mason's brain. These hard-bitten soldiers, burned copper-brown by the desert sun, could splotch their faces and bodies with war paint, and with headbands and manes no one could tell at a distance that they weren't Apaches.

He knew the look on his face was startled. Lieutenant Hunt saw it.

"You've got a plan, Captain Mason?" Eagerness and hope sprang into the lieutenant's eyes.

"A plan?" Bit by bit, in perfect order, the pieces were forming into a pattern in Mason's mind. Everything he needed was in the fort trader's post or in the quartermaster's supplies. "Let's say I have a vision, Hunt. A vision of what today's dawn will see. This whole fort blazing to the skies, abandoned to the enemy. G Company with the fort's women and children and sick in the wagons making a desperate stand out yonder near Rattlesnake Ridge, ringed around by Clawfist's reinforcements pouring down from the reservation to the north. And Clawfist coming up with his entire crew from the Border to the south to attack.

"That's what my vision is, Hunt."

"And it's hell, sir."

A grim smile cut Mason's tired face. "You're right it's hell, Hunt. On Clawfist, I hope. . . ."

Ahead of Mason, axles creaked and the shapes of tilt-covered wagons loomed blackly in the last minutes of the night as the column of vehicles and riders snaked over the sand. There was no use looking behind to the stockade of Fort Williams. The desperate step had been taken.

The desert dawn was a scant half-hour away and in the next half-hour the men and women and children of the fort would know safety or annihilation. Mason rode bare to his browned waist in coarse white trousers and moccasins, feeling the cool wind that comes before the dawn sweep against his parched face and body. Behind him figures of various sizes weaved and bounced in their McClellan saddles, their blue cavalry blouses making them little more than blurs in a column of twos.

"All clear, Wilkinson," he said to the young lieutenant pacing beside him. "You're in command once this train reaches the rise near Rattlesnake Ridge. You've got your orders straight?"

"Yes, sir," Lieutenant Wilkinson said huskily. "And thanks for the chance, sir. I'll do my best."

"Just keep on firing when I give the signal. Either Clawfist jumps or he doesn't. The rest is up to me." He gestured toward the shadows that veiled the desert to the south. "We know Clawfist's out there about five miles, waiting to attack at dawn. That long-haired Mex teamster's hand I sent out there in a breechclout and headband brought that news in. Torque got to Clawfist all right."

HE REINED down with Wilkinson and let the column pass. It went forward slowly and split up, the wagons lurching ahead of the troop of riders. In the east the paling light grew grayer; dawn would rush across the cactus-dotted sand soon, and battle would begin.

"Fort up the train, Wilkinson. Keep the Gatlings in the wagons aimed for heaven when the Apache charge starts."

"Yes, sir. And thanks again for the chance. If I hadn't let Torque get out—"

"Dry up. It's another day."

Mason jammed his heels into his mount's flank and trotted fast past the awkward column of riders. The ground rose, boulder-strewn and rugged, and he went by the side of a heavy freighter with its canvas side cut out to let the muzzle of a tripod-mounted Gatling protrude. He passed a second freighter just drawing to a halt with a second Gatling jutting from the hole in its canvas, and Sergeant Fifer on horseback by the tail-gate.

"All right, Sergeant?"

"All right, Captain. I can't hit a barn door with the damn thing but I know how to fire it."

Mason trotted on. His orders had been given, the madness-inspired plan was in action, there was nothing further to do but wait and hope. And take a last look at Handsome Randy Reed and his sister Leslie in the ambulance.

He drew up at its rear and looked in silently. Leslie's face was watchful and fatigued in the lanternlight as she bent over the splint-wrapped form on the ambulance stretcher. She was wearing the second lieutenant's blouse again. Soundless as he was, she heard Mason and turned.

"How is he?"

"Do you care, Captain Mason? As a matter of fact, he's just about coming out of the morphine."

On the stretcher Reed began to mutter raggedly.

"I'm not going to ask you questions, Captain Mason," Leslie said. "This scarecrow column is some kind of a decoy, I know. It's up to us to obey your orders, no matter how you came to be in command. I'm not even going to ask you where G Company is, or why you're riding stripped to the waist."

"Clawfist can pour hundreds of braves over the walls of the fort anywhere he wants to and swamp us all," Mason said thickly. "Out here we've got a tight ring of boulders and wagons, with no roofs to fire above our heads and burn us out. Here we may be able to stick it out until the infantry gets in."

Out of the thick muttering from Reed words began to be distinguishable.

"What—how—"

A sudden splash of flame lit the final min-

utes of the dark. It surged up from the inside of the fort a mile away. Billowing, pulsing into the paling arch, it told that Fort Williams had been abondoned and was afire, the garrison gone.

"What's that?" broke out Leslie.

"Something for Clawfist."

Reed's voice rose, stronger, but still delirious. "Tell that damn Bullhead Mason—"

"Good-by," said Mason abruptly.

He kneed his mount away from the ambulance. Around him on the rise the figures in uniform, with carbines in hand, were being posted by Lieutenant Wilkinson. Mason slapped heels and went down the rise and over the sand for the blur of Rattlesnake Ridge at top speed.

He pulled in beside rangy Lieutenant Hunt, stripped to the waist, and also wearing Apaches' white trousers. From behind the cover of the ridge crest, out of sight in the lifting gloom, came the stamp of many horses and the low-voiced muttering of men.

"You know the situation and the plan," Mason said curtly. "In two minutes more you lead the circle. Keep an eye on me. I stay on this ridge, watching for Clawfist. You put on the show with G, Hunt, I direct it. That enough?"

"Enough, sir. Good show, I think, sir."

THE sky to the east lightened fast. Mason took a last look toward the blazing fort in the distance, let his eyes rest on the ring of uniforms and wagons, now becoming plainer in the increased visibility, and he breathed hard. Creeping rapidly, a warm golden light appeared on the eastern horizon.

"Go, Hunt!"

"G Company, forward!" yelled Hunt.

He pelted down the slope and onto the wasteland. Over the ridge tore the strangely accoutered horses and men that made up G Company, and their dust streamed back into Mason's eyes. He lifted his Colt and fired a single shot skyward. Instantly the crackle of gunfire came from the rise where the wagons stood; the spits of flame lit the half-murk.

An alarm rocket soared upward and burst in crimson balls, visible clear to Old Mexico. Another rocket and another rushed skyward and exploded, spelling the wagon train's cry for help.

Almost instantly, it seemed to Mason, dawn light came rushing across the desert from the sun lifting now over the horizon, and the scene leaped clear. Around the wagons and the blue uniforms raced G Company in the deadly Apache circle. At a distance no one could tell them from Apaches. Their sun-browned bodies half naked or clad in long Apache shirts from the post trader's store, with shoulder-length black manes and Turkey red headbands, riding bare-backed, they were perfect in the part.

And the men in blue uniforms back of the spitting carbines looked like the real thing in fighting troopers, although the uniforms had been crammed onto quartermaster's soldiers, housekeeping troops and teamsters, trader's clerks, and half-grown boys and Mexicans, all the transient population of Fort Williams.

A few husky young wives of noncoms and privates who knew firearms were in that firing line. The older women and the children crouched in the canvas-covered wagons.

Even with every shot from the bogus Apaches and Gatling guns going high over the targets the sham battle looked like actual combat. Would it take in Clawfist, the crafty old killer, at long range? Would he think the reservation braves he expected had arrived and cut off the getaway of the fort personnel?

WITH his glasses, Mason studied the empty waste to the south while the G Company Indians yelled and shot on in their dust-streaming circle. He was trying to put his mind inside the mind of Clawfist out yonder. Almost at once he caught the tiny plumes of dust across the miles, strung out in a long disorderly line. Clawfist and his horsemen were coming!

In minutes Clawfist's naked eyes would make out and study the battle. They would see what was apparently a hard, deadly ring of desperate troops putting up the stiffest of defenses. Would Clawfist fling in his own riders to swamp the blue ring and take terrible losses, or would he veer to the burning fort where there was loot—whisky and blankets and tobacco—leaving the Apache reinforcements to keep the wagon train pinned down?

On the far desert the dust plumes slowed and halted. Now was the moment of Clawfist's

decision, and Mason meant to make up his mind for him.

He reached down to his waistband and drew out the improvised Apache mane of flimsy tow that had been dipped in a kettle of boiling boot blacking, and wormed it onto his head under a band of Turkey red calico. He tore down from the crest of Rattlesnake Ridge to cut across the circle of G Company's Apaches and hauled rein beside a knot of six Indian-garbed troopers—the demolition crew he had left behind in the fort, who had caught up with the action.

"All right, Gatling crew!" he bit out. "If Clawfist keeps on to join this battle go in and man the machine-guns on the wagons while we hit him on the flank and fall back on the train. If Clawfist swerves off, follow G Company."

Shots still slammed from the boulders, the Gatlings blew the morning sky apart and the racing "Indians" under Hunt swept around to pass Mason. Once more Mason had his glasses to his eyes. Out where Clawfist lurked there was dusty motion.

"Swerving!" Mason said huskily, as Hunt pulled in next him, his horse's forelegs beating air. "Clawfist's swerving! He's going for the fort and the loot the way I hoped. Race him to it! Forward, h-o-o-o!"

Under him his mount leaped into a rushing gallop and his hand signaled the change in the circle's course. A mile to go to the stockade where the flames were dying down but the black smoke of destruction still roiled.

Gunfire from the blue ring ceased, the Apache circle looped out straight for a run to the stockade. To Clawfist it would look as if his reinforcements from the reservation, who had hit too tough a porcupine, were trying to reach the fort in time to get the cream of the loot first. No Apache threw his life away without a good reason for it; easy loot came ahead of killing.

Now there was nothing to do but let events follow their bloody course to a bloody finish. In a long, undisciplined straggle Mason led his riders, waving their weapons in simulated triumph, across the distance that their stripped mounts covered in minutes. With Clawfist's attackers still two miles off but coming at full velocity, he angled and swept in through the open, deserted south gate.

With the reek of raw whisky smashing into his nostrils from the barrels that had been broken open and were puddling the sand inside the gate, he rushed his mount in onto an area of disaster. Smoke bellied across the big parade grounds in banks, stirred by the dawn breeze, flame leaped from the roof of a condemned warehouse that blazed from end to end. Old wagons burned here and there, piles of hay behind officers' cottages and smaller buildings sent up sable clouds that looked as though the buildings themselves were afire.

"Break!" yelled Mason. "We've pulled 'em in!"

"Sure did."

Hunt's painted face split in a harsh grin. He split the straggle and took twenty white-shirted, sweating men toward the long, low-roofed trader's post. The blacking from their false manes stained their cheeks, they looked like scarecrows, but there was no comedy in their faces; only a firm and hard resolve, mixed with hope.

"Come on, Gatling crew!" yelled Mason. "Headquarters roof!"

He flung himself off horse at the Headquarters building and crouched behind the rain barrel at its corner from which the long cuts ran out through the baked earth in tiny trenches leading to a single center. The freed horses ran here and there and stopped, G Company Apaches danced up and down on the porches of Officer's Row cottages. Everywhere Clawfist and his Apaches looked they were going to see a disorderly mob of reservation braves in ahead of them, looting and getting the best of everything without a fight.

CLAWFIST and his riders were coming now in two sections. In a racing crowd that filled the south gate from side to side a mass of Indians sent their ponies through and came streaming down the parade ground. Out from the wide door of the adobe post a dozen G Company Indians were trundling a whisky barrel. They upended it and smashed it open with an ax, dipping into it with tin cups and howling as the liquor ran over their chins. Other Indian troopers pitched bolts of red cloth out of the open windows and brandished handfuls of cigars.

"Yaalilil—eeeee!" rose the answer from Clawfist's riders, rushing to join the looting before it was too late.

Mason saw Hunt's long arm rise in signal and his fake Apaches plunged back into the post. He saw them leap out the back windows and tear for the cover of two upended wagons, crouching down behind them with carbines and Colts ready.

Up to the door of the trader's post pelted the mounted Apaches, flung themselves off and rushed into the building by door and low windows. In the parade ground their horses milled, the trader's post echoed with their din.

"More than a hundred," Mason grimly said.

He lowered his Colt muzzle and fired into the black powder covering the bottom of the six-inch deep trench in front of him. It ran to within fifty feet of the building, where it split into shallower branches. Flame leaped, smoke roiled and ran with the speed of a desert jackrabbit, breaking into the channels each of which led into a separate section of the low-roofed trading post.

The fire in the outer right-hand trench outstripped the others, vanished in the end of the building and, roaring, detonating, the whole section of the structure went up. The opposite end blew so fast its explosion almost blended with the first, then the whole center of the post erupted in a ghastly blast of smoke and flame.

Crouched behind his barrel, Mason reeled with shock. Where the trader's post had stood Apache bodies, arms and legs, adobe bricks, wooden timbers, rose skyward and fell. Clawfist's raiders, charging into the trap, had been blown to fragments by every pound of blasting powder in the fort.

"Gatlings, take the rest!" screamed Mason.

Deafened, he could hardly hear his own voice. Above him, from the machine guns mounted on the Headquarters roof, crashed the fire of the revolving barrels, aimed at the mass of Apaches who had pulled up at a distance from the trading post, unable to rush its doors for the crowd. Ripping and slicing, the fusillade caught them dumb-stricken, the explosion tearing them off their horses and strewing the sand with more bloody human litter.

Snapshooting from behind their wagons, Lieutenant Hunt and his group picked off the fringes of Apaches who ran for a cover that didn't exist on the bare parade ground. From the open windows of Headquarters and Officers' Row cottages the carbines of more troopers jutted, shooting into the wreck of Clawfist's force.

Mason slumped forward, his stomach collapsing from the reaction of relief. He caught himself with one hand on the barrel. This was it! It was incredible but the ambush was complete. As a screeching straggle of Apaches galloped for the gate and the desert there weren't more than forty of them. Almost two hundred of Clawfist's tribesmen had been blotted off the face of the map, crippled by wounds or had their hands up in surrender.

The whole action had taken hardly more than minutes. But in battle a minute could be an eternity.

The last blasts of the Gatlings on the roof took the fragments of Clawfist's horsemen going out the gate and a blanketlike silence dropped. Nothing to do now but herd up the remnants of the Apache attackers and call back the decoy troops from the wagon ring out on the desert.

"Push those Apaches into the nearest warehouse, Lieutenant Hunt, and lock them up!" shouted Mason, and Hunt waved back in answer.

A SUDDEN faint clatter began and Gates, the signal corporal, ran for the telegraph shack. He burst out of it with a message sheet in his hand and tore for Mason, pulling up in front of him.

"From Colonel Church at the reservation, sir. I left the wire open as you ordered."

"Good, Corporal."

The message was short:

Captain Randolph Reed,
Fort Williams

One hundred and fifty braves broke off reservation yesterday headed for Border to join Clawfist. Remainder of Indians bottled up here and rising definitely stopped. Take all precautions.

Church.

One hundred and fifty more Apaches coming, a second striking force running for the Border to join Clawfist! But where were they?

The sudden appalling crash of gunfire to the east seemed to strike on Mason's eardrums

with the force of cloudburst thunder. He raced along the Headquarters building to the steps and climbed fast. On the flat rooftop where the crews stood by their smoking Gatlings the watchtower reared and Mason went up the ladder, panting.

He pulled erect on the platform and leveled his glasses. He knew now where Clawfist's reservation braves, the reinforcements he and G Company impersonated, were.

In a disorderly and panic-stricken rout the uniformed men from the wagon ring were racing back across the desert for the fort, the big tilt wagons that held the women and children lumbering along with them. Already they were halfway to the stockade gate. Limned against the sky on the rise, deserted now except for a dozen or more figures in blue, stood the two wagons that held the Gatlings, with the ambulance containing Reed and Leslie between them. Even as Mason stared in horror the wagons, with their teams hitched, drew apart on the rise and left the ambulance alone to face the oncoming horde.

And far out on the desert in a rushing storm of dust came the white and red shirts of Clawfist's reservation jumpers, charging for their helpless prize.

"The fool! That fool Wilkinson!"

One more raw second lieutenant had pulled a fatal blunder. He had broken what looked like a deadly defensive position out on the desert and now the onrushing Apaches saw a mob of blue uniforms scrambling for safety, leaving the wagons behind. In the wagons were the Gatlings but Wilkinson, at one, was no expert and Sergeant Fifer, at the other, knew nothing or ranging or traversing. The wagons and the ambulance on the rise were abandoned targets and the Apaches were going to overrun them first.

"Hunt!" Mason shouted desperately through cupped hands. "Mount up! The wagons are being attacked!"

Over the parade ground the orders crackled as Mason slid down the ladder to the roof and rushed the stairs. Revolver- and saber-belted, and with carbines in hand, G Company had slammed onto their horses' back and at a gallop Mason headed them for the gate. The walls of the stockade flashed past and Mason swerved his column, driving across the open waste.

His throat was dry and his heart hammered at his ribs. He galloped past the blue stragglers, bouncing in their saddles on their way to the fort, with hardly a glance at them. His eyes were glued to the dust of the Apaches' charge now hardly a quarter of a mile from the wagons and the ambulance in which the unconscious man and his sister helplessly faced the savage fury of the reservation renegades.

There was no chance whatever that G Company could reach the rise in time for a surprise flank attack on the reservation braves. They would have to meet them head-on, with less than one-third their numbers. And still they would be too late!

DISTANCE dwindled by the second, but the Apache charge had swung into the old battle crescent, a long curving line of racing horses and yelling Indians. The machine-gun in the right-hand wagon opened up raggedly. That would be Wilkinson firing, his bullets kicking sand before the Apache attack. The bullets began to pick off riders in an apparently aimless crossfire that left the rest of the Indian line untouched.

A groan broke from Mason and checked in his parched throat. For out of the side of the left-hand wagon, where the tyro Sergeant Fifer's gun stood, leaped a savage sheet of gun flame that took the outer fringe of the charge's far right flank, tore it to ribbons and moved inward, killing as it struck.

It was the enfilade of a master machine-gunner, sweeping like a scythe, taking riders and horses in a welter of destruction. No lead was missing the target.

Wilkinson's faltering fire began to steady, and the twin streams of slugs began to draw together. Howls of savage fury rose, but from that lethal crossfire there was no escape. Mason looked on with ering decimation.

Still the charge came on, carried by its own sheer momentum. Mason took his troopers up the slope as the final crest of the Apache flood, the tight center that remained, stormed onto the rise and straight for the wagons.

"Off with those manes so the gunners won't shoot us!" yelled Mason. "Pistols and sabers! Go in!"

In a mad rush he took his column straight in between the wagons and flung it at the

welter of Apaches, already reeling under the Gatlings' blasts that took them full at fifty yards. Mason was riding bareback, Colt jumping in his left hand, saber slashing in his right at the copper faces and writhing bodies. Behind him the crazy painted troopers of G Company pounded in a flood of steel and gunsmoke that smashed clean through the wreck of the Indian charge and sent it scattering.

Mason pulled down and turned around. He was conscious of Lieutenant Wilkinson's face above the right-hand wagon of Gatling barrels with Sergeant Fifer dropping a last round into the weapon's hopper. Incredulously he looked to the left-hand Gatling whose masterly handling had cut the red foe to pieces. And in the loader's stance he saw a slim figure in a second lieutenant's blouse, and behind it still at the gun, braced on a leg splinted from ankle to thigh, face stony with pain and grim determination, was Captain Handsome Randy Reed. . . .

Not half an hour later stoop-shouldered Dr. Fields dropped off the ambulance and smiled tiredly.

"He'll do, Mason. Extreme pain, of course, and shock reaction now the fight's over, but no extra damage to that splinted-up leg. It's remarkable what a man can force his body to do in an emergency. I've given him another opiate that'll take hold in a few minutes."

Mason dismounted and caught the step of the slowly moving ambulance into which Reed had been transferred. He was back on the stretcher, the skin of his face drawn and blanched, but his eyes were bright. Leslie sat on a low box beside him. Her hair, loosed from under her campaign hat, fell golden about her shoulders.

"Great work, Randy," Mason said huskily. "You saved the fort."

"You saved it first, Bullhead." Reed managed a grin. "Wilkinson told me your plan when I came to in that wagon ring, with the fake firing going on. You think fast and well, Bullhead."

"So do you. We got Clawfist inside the fort, yes, but those reservation reinforcements I had to take a chance on had us cold. No more powder ambush inside. Then you ambushed them beautifully outside."

"Yes. I'm still post commander. I ordered those decoy troopers to run for it and drew the wagons apart to bring the Injuns onto them. Also to give Wilkinson and myself a field for a crossfire enfilade. Nothing can stand against machinegun enfilade. I learned that when I went to Gatling gun school in Kansas."

MASON'S grin answered Reed's. "And graduated as top honor man as usual, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact, I did. And Leslie, who spent the summer with me, learned Gatlings too." Reed winced and his eyes closed with pain.

The axles of the ambulance creaked steadily. Mason could hear the driver in front cursing cheerfully at his mules. The battle was over, the ruck of Apache dead littered the desert, and inside the fort the troopers already would be piling Clawfist's casualties and cleaning up.

"You'll be in the hospital in ten minutes," Mason said soothingly. "Not only is the battle over, but the war's over. Clawfist's power is gone."

A sudden strange peace swept him. There was no hatred or envy in him any longer for Captain Handsome Randy Reed, a stark fighting man to the core, brilliant as he himself could never be. Randy was soldier-born and soldier-bred, and he had inherited all his major-general father's ability and courage the way other men inherited business ability. That was all, and it was enough.

Reed gasped a little.

"The old class came through, Bullhead. Something to send back to the Point. Handsome Randy Reed and Bullhead Mason, fighting together instead of each other, bygones all gone. I'd really forgotten that bad blood when I tried to get you your promotion to Washington. Then we got off on the wrong foot when we met, and waked the feud again."

"I know. My fault, Randy. I jumped to a bullhead conclusion."

"So did I on the platform. I know now you'd spotted Injuns when you knocked my head under cover and I swung myself off into midair going for you. I've told Leslie, because she'd done some conclusion jumping herself."

"Shake hands, you two damned fools," said Leslie.

The hands of Bullhead Mason and Hand-

some Randy Reed met in a firm clasp. Mason realized that it was the first time in their lives their hands had ever met, but from now on that clasp of friendship would never be broken. As the grip relaxed Reed drew a long breath and closed his eyes drowsily.

"Take it easy, Randy."

"I will, Bullhead."

Reed's breathing became long and regular, his head rolled to one side on the improvised pillow, and he went into a dreamless sleep as the doctor's opiate took hold. The ambulance jolted on, broken noises sounded ahead, as they neared the fort gate.

"I really did hate you, Bullhead Mason," Leslie said quietly. "For a long time, until I learned how Randy was changed for the better after that fight at the Point. Other classmates I met later told me so. He stopped using his looks to cut out other men with girls. He told me himself he was always under criticism and that that was the way he fought back. It was almost a relief to him to be marred. A general's son is always in the limelight, either toadied up to or belittled, and so is a general's daughter. I'm supposed to be a lily-handed, snobbish, gold-braid girl in the drawing rooms at Washington. Do you suppose I ever told anyone I know how to load and run a Gatling? They'd laugh at me."

"Those Injuns out there aren't laughing."

"I dance beautifully. Even my worst girl enemies admit, but they don't know I can flap up a wonderful mess of buckwheat cakes. Do you prefer buckwheats to bullets, Captain Bullhead Mason?"

She was laughing at him again. She didn't hate him, he didn't hate her, and he never had. He had seen ridicule where none was meant, he had mistaken friendly raillery for hostile irony, he'd been in love with this girl since the first moment they'd met, and he had raged futilely at a nonexistent barrier between them. Bullheadedness might be valuable in battle, but not in human relations.

"Too long on the desert," she said, "too long fighting Indians with no rest. Ten years of all work and no play for Bullhead Mason. It'd make any man hard and maybe bitter and overprone to brood on an old feud."

"I guess you're right."

"A little civilization for awhile? You'll be the lion of the drawing rooms on this fort business when you take your furlough in Washington. I imagine they'll call you there at once now."

"I'm not taking my furlough in Washington! I'm taking it here, right in this fort!"

HE KNEW now what he wanted above all else—to be near this girl beside him. He could, in sun-scorched Fort Williams, and he wouldn't mind the heat, the glare or the dust any longer. For thirty days he'd see her every day. And after that their trails would separate.

"Here in the fort? Why ever—"

"Captain Mason!"

The call came from outside. The ambulance driver pulled down. Mason saw the stockade logs looming.

"Business," said Leslie and smiled.

Mason jumped to the ground. Apache bodies lay along the gate walls where the Gatlings had hit the rear of Clawfist's flight.

"Well, Wilkinson?"

"Torque," said Wilkinson, and gestured toward a broken copper-brown body next the wall. "Thought you'd like to know right away. He didn't get away the second time."

"Good! That leaves Clawfist, but his army's shattered."

Sergeant Fifer grinned from the back of the horse he was reining down.

"Clawfist's on Headquarters desk waiting for the Captain. I just laid him there wrapped up neat in an old bandanna."

"Fifer, are you crazy?"

"What's left of the old redskin, I mean, Captain. Picked up about thirty yards from where the trader's post blew. Right arm up to the elbow, silver chief's bracelet, Clawfist hand. It's Clawfist, all right."

"Ah!"

All cleaned up, the whole war cleaned up. Peace on the Border at last. Smoke still wafted from the blasted post, torn Apache bodies stained the parade ground, but it was the wreckage of victory. Mason's eyes went to the ambulance, trotting well up the parade ground, and Fifer's gaze followed his.

"Sergeant! Off that horse! I want it!"

"I'm in the air, captain."

(Continued on page 96)

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Picture No. 1 shows how the incision in the scalp looked after the tissue section had been removed (from the scalp of a member of the test group.)

Unproductive Hair Follicle

Picture No. 2 shows the cross section of an unproductive hair follicle. This miscroscopic view was obtained by taking a thin slice of the scalp section taken out of the incision, then mounting it on a slide. This examination of tissues from bald areas revealed that in many cases follicles (hair roots) were alive yet not producing hair. Medical transcripts from this research indicate that the use of the Brandenfels System offers bald people a wonderful new hope.

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OUT OF THE CHUTES

RODEO, of course, is a creation of the Old West, but you can also say that the legend of the Old West was at least partly created by rodeo. America was hardly aware of the cowboy until Buffalo Bill started touring with his Wild West Shows, exhibiting the cowboy as a heroic figure, gaudily dressed, handsome, reckless and brave.

But the cowboys of the old West weren't very glamorous. Their work was hard, sometimes hazardous, often dull. They were hellraisers once they hit town, but they weren't much admired for that. Nobody considered them to be dashing heroes, least of all themselves.

In a recent book, *The Look of the Old West*, published by Viking, author Foster-Harris points out that the old-time cowhand was a conservative. He was practical enough to use and wear whatever he'd found from experience worked best on the job. "And until the 'Bill shows' (Wild West Shows, of which the Buffalo Bill show was the most famous) and the rodeos started demonstrating what a helluva feller the cowboy was, he never thought about duding himself up much, especially not out on the range."

The cowboy, the settler, the trader, the prospector all wore much the same outfit, at first. You bought the most durable shirt and pants you could find—by 1870 everyone, not just the cowboy, was buying Levis, which really stood up to abuse in the saddle, behind the plow or down a mine shaft. You couldn't buy a bright-colored outfit if you wanted one, and you wouldn't want anything that showed the dirt. In fact, the only relief from the drabness of the cowboy's outfit was the bandanna around his neck, and even that would soon lose its red or blue hue with constant wear and infrequent soap and water.

Once the Wild West Show began giving the cowboy ideas about how glamorous he ought to look, he got into the spirit of things by borrowing decorative ideas from the Mexican vaqueros and the Plains Indians, both of whom liked their apparel as gaudy as possible. From the Mexicans came the idea of decorating hats, vests, chaps and boots with silver; from the Indians the cowboy borrowed the idea of stitched, tooled and dyed leather on the cuffs of his gloves, on his pockets or anywhere else he wanted some color.

It was almost the turn of the century, however, before the cowboy woke up to the fact that in everyone's eyes but his own he was a real glamorous guy. That was long after the trail drive days were over, the long, gruelling treks to the railheads or to summer graze, which really started the cowboy on his way to immortality.

It was on the trail drives that the settler first saw the cowboy, and it was in the boom towns that the businessman first saw him. In neither case was it a matter of love at first sight. And yet the farm boy, even as he helped his father string the barbed wire that the cowboys hated, must have secretly in his heart admired the dusty figure riding point on the herd, because like as not he ran off when he was old enough to try to get a job doing the same thing.

Certainly the merchants in the new towns didn't like their first glimpse of the cowboy. The thriving community of Salina, Kansas, refused to allow Texas cattle to be loaded in their new railroad yard and thus missed out on both the prosperity and notoriety that the cowboys and their herds brought to places like Abilene and Dodge. Respectable people shunned the wild men from Texas, but they helped to spread his fame by reporting his impudence in letters and by word of mouth when they traveled East on their new railroads.

In the 1880's the country was beginning to

be aware that there was a wild and wooly breed of men in the West, but few people east of the Mississippi had any idea of what these cowboys looked like or what they did for their thirty a month and found.

But by that time the cowboys had devised their own method of spreading their fame by inventing rodeo. They'd been riding broncs and roping cattle for a long time, but it was on the trail drives that they added the element of competition and thus made their daily chores into a sport.

Several outfits might travel together to and from the lush grasslands of the Northwest, bragging as they rode of their bronc-busting or steer roping prowess. When the time came to round up the cattle after the herds had fattened on the summer graze, it was a fine opportunity to prove their boasting. Bets ran high, and naturally the cowboys who put on the best performances made the most money.

Incidentally, neither the word "roundup" nor the operation itself was native to the West. Southern cattle raisers in the East used to let their stock run wild in the hills, and they got the idea of getting together to sort out their own once a year. It was not until after the Civil War that the method was used in the West. Before then the cowboys on one ranch would be sent out on periodic "cow hunts," to bring in only the cattle wearing that ranch's brand.

But once the roundup idea got started in the West, the cowboys enthusiastically made it their own. Roundup time with its wild contests among representatives of several outfits got to be the high point of the year. Soon the news that roundup time was show-time reached the townsfolk, and the cowboys had an audience.

In 1873 the town of Pecos, Texas, persuaded the cowboys to stage a contest in the main square as a Fourth of July celebration. Everybody turned out for the free show.

It took five years before the next step in the development of rodeo was taken. Prescott, Ariz., is generally credited with being the first to charge admission. At that moment rodeo became a professional sport, and a lot of people began getting ideas.

[*Turn page*]

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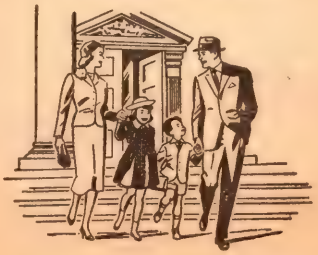

WORSHIP TOGETHER EVERY WEEK!

Buffalo Bill Cody, Pawnee Bill Lillie and Colonel George W. Miller were among the first to see the money-making possibilities of rodeo. They were all showmen, however, and what they brought to the big cities was not a sporting competition but a Wild West Show. All the performers were hired on salary. They travelled together as a circus does, and they played mostly under canvas.

During the Gay Nineties and in the early years of this century, the Wild West Shows thrived. People flocked to see the daring bronc-busters and the dashing rope artists, and they began to idolize the cowboy as a real hero of the West.

And then the dime novel brightened the cowboy's luster still more.

There were new words in everyone's vocabulary—words which the real cowboys themselves hadn't used. Take the term "buckaroo," for instance. It seems to have derived from the Spanish word *vaquero,* but the Texans who learned it from the Mexicans didn't pronounce it *that* badly. It took Easterners to twist the pronunciation and the spelling into buckaroo.

The dime novel writers also enlarged the meaning of cowpoke and cowpuncher to include all cowhands, who had never described their chores as poking or punching cattle. That was the work of the laborers who rode the cattle trains, and literally did poke the cattle with long poles through the bars of the cars. The purpose of the task was not to torment the poor critters, but simply to keep them on their feet, because a cow is much more subject to injury on a moving train when she's lying down.

The movies spelled the end of the Wild West Shows just as surely as they killed vaudeville, but the movies took up the job of glamorizing the cowboy where the Bill shows had left off. By this time, of course, the real cowboys had long since discovered what romantic figures they were, and they were very happy to dress and act the part. Cowboys thus became the only group of men in the country who could let their imagination run riot when it came to dressing up.

After World War I real rodeo which had started everything off in the impromptu cowboy contests, was just getting back on its feet, but as sport not entertainment.

The rodeo producers first formed an association in 1929. The cowboys got together in 1936 and called themselves Turtles. About ten years later they strengthened their organization and gave themselves a less colorful and more accurate name, the Rodeo Cowboys Association.

Today rodeo is one of the biggest sports in the country. The total attendance last year was about 25 million. There are 3,000 professional cowboys and there are about 600 rodeos which put up purses to lure them into the arena.

Probably the reason for its tremendous popularity is that people love the Old West, and the rodeo ring is just about the only place where the Old West survives.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

FORT OF FURY

(Continued from page 92)

Fifer's boots had hardly hit ground before Mason had vaulted into saddle. He went at the gallop and pulled to a walk at the ambulance step. Leslie smiled out at him.

"Why am I taking my furlough in this post? Because you're not going to be in Washington this winter. You plan to go abroad."

"I've changed my mind. I'm staying here with Randy till his convalescence is over and he's back to duty. Then I'm going back to Washington."

"With me?" Incredible hope rose in him.

"Exactly, Captain Bullhead Mason." Her smile was the most glorious thing he had ever seen. "We're passing Headquarters, Captain Bullhead Mason. You'll have to drop off and attend to the backwash of battle as acting post commander. After that I'll—I'll be waiting for you—Alvin."

"You—you—"

"Army job first. That's the orders from the General's daughter. Yes, I'll be waiting for you, Alvin."

And he knew that she would.

Man From Georgia *(Continued from page 58)*

"No," Ephraim said mildly, "we are moving. I gave you my word. This changes nothing. I would not have you think I talked the boy into this marriage in order to keep the land. If I had wanted to keep it, I could have killed you before you ever got your weapon out of the leather. The land is yours."

Ballard's face mirrored his surprise.

It was an awkward moment then, a moment when things could have gone sour. If it had been just the men there, it might have. But now Shirley came to take Jed's arm and cling to him. Virginia, with all the manners of a southern belle, walked firmly to Mr. Ballard's side.

"I have the kettle on. Perhaps you would join all of us in a cup of tea."

Ballard stiffened. He looked close at Ephraim and at Jed, to see if they were laughing at him. He saw only friendliness and hope in their faces. He looked at his daughter-in-law and saw a warm friendliness there. It was plain what was going through his mind. He was weighing the pleasant prospect of a daughter-in-law and grandchildren.

"I would like some tea, ma'am," he said.

After that it was all right. Before T. C. Ballard rode away, he asked Ephraim to stay on the land and this time Ephraim accepted. So it was that Ephraim's last daughter was married and the last ties with Georgia were severed. Now Ephraim and his entire family were a part of this new land.

Solution to puzzle on page 41

T	R	I	G	G	E	R	■	R	A	N	C	H	■	■
R	A	V	I	O	L	I	■	I	D	A	H	O	■	■
I	N	■	N	E	E	D	■	S	E	V	E	R	■	■
E	G	G	■	S	C	E	N	E	■	A	S	S	■	■
D	E	A	F	■	T	R	I	■	E	L	S	E	■	■
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H	A	S	H	■	P	U	P	■	T	E	S	T	■	■
E	L	K	■	P	E	R	I	L	■	A	T	E	■	■
R	I	A	T	A	■	N	A	I	L	■	A	N	■	■
D	E	T	E	R	■	I	N	D	I	A	N	S	■	■
S	N	E	A	K	■	P	O	S	T	A	G	E	■	■

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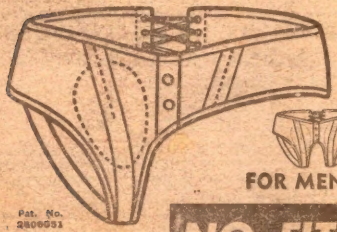

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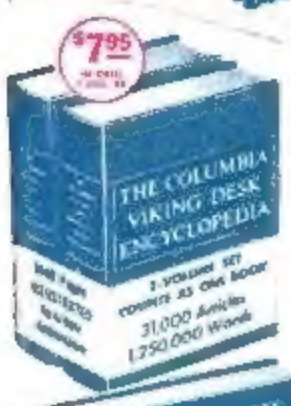

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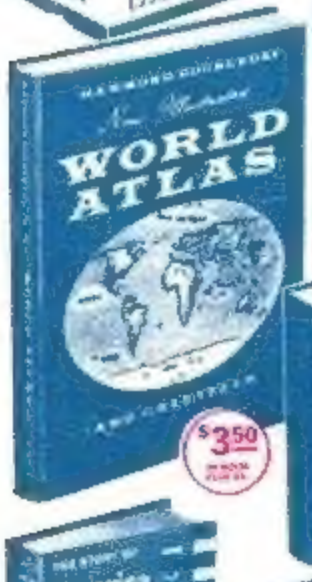

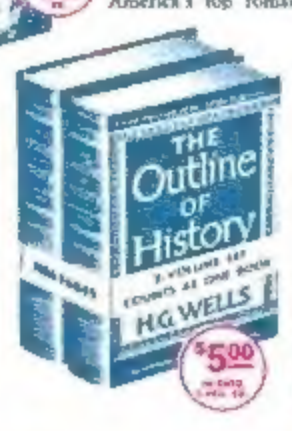

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